

MY PINK ROAD TO RUSSIA



SONJA FRANETA



Annotation

My Pink Road to Russia: Tales of Amazons, Peasants, and Queers presents an engaging mix of Sonja Franeta's stories, memoir, poems, articles, and interviews. This radical lesbian from an immigrant Slavic family connects with her passion for Russia and finds out some touching as well as dangerous facts about queers in that mysterious country. The stories range from the seeds of a queer life planted in a high school girl on the verge of coming out, to reflections on the challenges of teaching, to an article about a Siberian lesbian the author interviewed who was later murdered. Franeta shares her enthusiasm for Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, chronicles the motivation and complexities of humanitarian trips to Kosovo and a township in South Africa, and mines her memory for unique and universal tales about her family from the former Yugoslavia.

About the Author

Sonja Franeta is a writer, educator and activist born in the Bronx, New York to an immigrant Yugoslav family. She received a Master's degree in Russian from New York University and a Master's in Comparative Literature from University of California at Berkeley. She is passionate about Russian language, culture, queers and literature.

- [Sonja Franeta](#)

- [Introduction: An Invitation to Readers](#)

- [Part 1: Bronx Beginnings](#)

- [Girlfriends](#)

- [Escapeto America](#)

- [Imperfect Glass](#)

- [Pigeons of Heiden](#)

- [Pilgrimage](#)

- [After Church, Yugoslavia](#)

- [Mamica](#)

- [Peasant Roots](#)

- [My Violin Loves to Play](#)

- [Part 2: Activist](#)

- [Emerging Voices](#)

- [Can Factory Sonnets](#)

- [Woman Machinist](#)

- [Kosovo Diary: June/July 1999](#)

- [South Africa: For Nelson Mandela](#)

- The Rest is Poetry: Why We Come Out
- The Real Poem
- Part 3: Journeys and Interviews in Russia
 - Revolutionary Romances
 - Siberians: Two Interviews
 - Amazon Sisters on the Trans-Siberian Railroad
 - The Siberian Interviews Journal: July 1995
 - Eighteen Years in the Gulag: Kuzmich
 - In the Crimea
 - Flowers for Sveta
 - Meeting Shamans
 - Smitten with Lyuba
 - Sissies and Queers
 - Who Was Sophia Parnok?
 - Kaleidoscope
 - My Tsvetaeva
 - Interview with Me
- Acknowledgments and Notes
- Bibliography
- About the Author
- Praise for My Pink Road to Russia
- Copyright

Sonja Franeta

**MY PINK ROAD TO RUSSIA
TALES OF AMAZONS, PEASANTS, AND
QUEERS**

*For my sister, Gina
And for all those who shared their
stories*

*“What do you know and what do
you just believe?”*

Linda Hogan, Power

Introduction: An Invitation to Readers

Welcome to a book about some of the people and stories I have encountered on my life path. It is a collection of essays and memories of the journeys and thoughts of a Bronx lesbian with Slavic roots. I invite you to meet some of the wonderful queers, peasants, and Amazons I have encountered along my pink road to Russia. *Rozovyi*, the Russian code word for lesbian, is also in the title of my first book in Russian, *Rozovye Flamingo (Pink Flamingos)*. And “pinko” is a pejorative word for socialist in English.

There are so many more stories I could have included in this book. For example, there’s the time I went to a bathhouse in St. Petersburg with my friend Irina whom I had recently interviewed. Irina was heterosexual but very queer-curious, and liked to hang around with me and show me her great city, which had just changed its name from Leningrad, so people would often slip and call it that still. I imagined Irina the descendant of survivors of the Siege of Leningrad during World War II. What history I felt in that city!

We went to her favorite bathhouse in old St. Petersburg, and I followed her in her rituals, first washing with a bowl of warm water along a countered and mirrored wall, using soap and various rough scrubbers and oddly shaped sponges, then going into the dark multileveled steam room, where there were a few other women, all nude, with kerchiefs wrapped around their heads. One woman poured water regularly over some hot rocks for the steam effect. After being in the silence for a while, Irina and I went back to the main room, where we rinsed and scrubbed ourselves again and dried off with sheets we had been using. She had been coaching me in a low voice the whole time. Irina said I should follow her into the room next to the lockers to have some tea. “And not get dressed?” I asked. She said no and ushered me into a toasty but messy room with a table in the center where two other women sat, totally unselfconscious about wearing nothing but a kerchief. We were all women, after all.

As we sipped our tea, Irina talked with the other women as if she knew them from her regular visits. There were no introductions made; people didn’t tend to do that in Russia the way we might do in the U.S. I sat quietly and listened, drinking my tea. Suddenly the door opened and I heard male voices. Two rough-looking guys in striped polyester workout jumpsuits came through the room rolling a big truck tire. What was going on? My first instinct was to cover myself, but the other women just continued talking. The men came in one door and went out another door, mumbling nonchalantly. It was not a voyeuristic thing, and the women did not seem perturbed in the least.

This was a snapshot of early 1990s Russia—a naive innocence about sex and gender and a certain claptrap way of doing things.

Yes, many stories are missing, but the book holds many more in the form of memoir, fiction, poems, interviews, and a talk. The narratives are based on meetings and interviews I had with family members and with those I met on my travels. Experiencing another person, beyond the interview, can have a strong effect, as did my friendship with Irina, and many others.

I had become very interested in Russian culture because I studied it and because of my Slavic roots. My family came to the United States from Yugoslavia after World War II. I have yearned to know more about my parents' backgrounds and what their lives and families were like before they settled in America. This search and my interest in Russia is not only an ethnic one but an interest in people telling their stories and what mattered to them. Also, I consider Russian queers to be family.

I have never lived a traditional life. I came out as a lesbian when I was twenty-five, and meanwhile became a political activist and continued into teaching English and living on a boat. All the while I've been a writer. My calling is all this and more, not one thing.

I was born in the Bronx, near the water. The Harlem River was in the view of our house in my teenage years. I used to watch sunsets from the little porch from the Bronx side of the river, the sun blazing over Dyckman Street in Manhattan. After reading a book that described old New York as teaming with streams beneath all the concrete we have today, I realized the streams beneath it now help the water and sewer systems function. I think of water flowing out and throughout the globe. We are all connected.

Growing up in an immigrant Yugoslav family in New York City was not easy for a child of war survivors. My parents, who had been traumatized by the terror of World War II, as most survivors were, often spoke of their gratitude to be in America, the land of opportunity. In my early childhood, to make ends meet, my parents were superintendents of a six-story building in the Bronx. They worked hard and managed to save some money. When I was thirteen they bought a house several blocks away. They told me about it first because I was the oldest. When I found out which house it was, I was scared—it was known among the neighborhood kids as the haunted house. After my father modified it, and we and the upstairs renters inhabited it, that perception changed. Stories about my parents and their struggles are also included in this book.

I got married to escape my father's violence. I had some time to rest and heal, only to come out as a lesbian when I met my first love on a trip to the Soviet Union in 1977. Although I had been dealing

with my feelings for girls/women since teenage years consciously and subconsciously, this transforming moment happened many dreams later. Fortunate to have the support and community of the San Francisco Bay Area, I marched proudly in the historic 1978 Gay Pride March with my first girlfriend. I was in the Socialist Workers Party for the next twelve years.

After that I lived on a forty-foot boat in the San Francisco Bay. I had a hard time letting go of the boat life. The sea... I came from the sea. I loved hearing the water sloshing against the boat, watching the bubbling water. I had a recurring dream as a teen that I was submerged in water, drowning, which I wrote about. I felt overcome by the water in the dream. I never understood what it meant. Not a nightmare, but a symbol of my life at the time perhaps, or where I came from, a memory almost, a state of mind, a lost life. We walk around with our memories.

I traveled and worked in Russia for most of the 1990s. I read Marina Tsvetaeva and discovered Sophia Parnok and other great Russian writers. In Russia I worked as an English teacher, and a project manager for a wheelchair program, and I organized a women's conference in Siberia, all the while researching queer life in Russia and the Soviet Union by doing interviews.

In 1996, I helped coordinate the First Queer Siberian Film Festival in Tomsk. Members of the San Francisco film community filmed the events and interviewed those involved; the festival had support from the LGBT film festival in San Francisco, *Frameline*, and even the Dutch Embassy. In 2004, my book, *Pink Flamingos: Ten Siberian Interviews*, based on interviews filmed with the help of Tracy Thompson and Douglas Conrad, appeared in Russian. At my book presentation in central Moscow at the headquarters of gay.ru (the most important queer Russian website), I was acknowledged as a sister and fellow activist. I was touched by the show of support for my book, the first about the hidden lives of Russian queers.

The stories in the third section of this book were written before the serious and violent repression of LGBT human rights by the Putin regime. There has been a backlash against the gains made during the 1990s, after the era of perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Putin regime has instituted severe homophobic laws to curb freedom of speech and any open activities of gays and lesbians and transgendered people. The government, the Orthodox Church and various religious leaders have even endorsed all-out violence against sexual minorities. In addition, Putin has attacked other dissenters against the regime, one important example being the imprisonment of three Pussy Riot members for singing an anti-Putin song in an Orthodox church in Moscow. Isn't this reminiscent of Stalinism?

Seeping out even to former Soviet Republics, the current fascist atmosphere in Russia is painful for those who have opened up and made lives for themselves. Meanwhile Putin's policies are also responsible for the unfortunate war in the Ukraine. This war recalls the civil war in the former Yugoslavia and has been devastating.

As far as gays are concerned, once people come out of the closet, it's very hard to go back. We don't know the future, but the situation now is very unjust for the sexual minorities of Russia, the Ukraine, and other former Soviet Republics. Activists who have come forth are brave, but they also want to live lives filled with love and promise. I appreciate their struggle and hope for a positive resolution. Our struggle in the U.S. is not over. Injustices abound worldwide. May we have a better life for all.

These days, as a professor of English as a Second Language in a community college in Oakland California, I try to bring what I have learned about culture and politics and queerness into my work with students. In 2009, I found my life partner, Sue, and we decided to get married two years later in New York City, then one of the few states that permitted same-sex marriage. We were married in City Hall in Lower Manhattan, and we stopped by to visit Occupy Wall Street. It seemed to be a moment of big changes in the U.S.

My seventh decade of life on this earth has begun. I realize how intertwined my immigrant experience is with my politics and my sexuality. My skills as a Russian speaker and translator, my Slavic heritage gave me an avenue to connect with queers in Russia. In a symbiotic way perhaps, through my efforts to learn more about Russian sexual minorities and their struggles, I learned about my own trajectory as a lesbian and political activist and a citizen of the world.

Now I return to the sea of words, this collection of memoirs, portraits, interviews, poems, and stories, *My Pink Road to Russia*. It has a three part-structure: the first is about my youth in the Bronx and my dreams, my complicated immigrant family; the second gives a taste of my political self as an activist, machinist, lesbian writer; the third is about my travels in Russia—my interviews, my theories about sexuality/gender, my experiences with Russian queers, ending with an interview with me.

Each piece in this book is intended to stand on its own so it can be read independently of the others, which inevitably involves a certain amount of repetition, but I wanted you to be able to dip into the book as you please. My hope is that you will read what interests you and that you will learn more about the lives and concepts you may not be aware of. There is much in this world we do not know. Enjoy!



Part 1: Bronx Beginnings

*Underneath an abject willow,
Lover, sulk no more:
Act from thought should
quickly follow.
What is thinking for?*

W. H. Auden

Girlfriends

“St. Paul’s, St. Paul’s, never takes a fall,” the cheerleaders yelled in unison, arms harmonious in precise strokes, the, pompoms at their feet on the shiny blond floor of the gym. Two marched forward at the end of the cheer to do splits. We let out a roar and clapped wildly.

We especially loved home games; many more people showed up from our side, and the team felt more confident. When the cheerleaders paraded onto the floor, white skirts pressed, navy blue sweaters dominated by a big white P, they were the image of what all us girls wanted to be—neat, blond, pretty. Their jumps made us so proud, as if they were dancers performing a choreographed piece.

After the cheerleaders on each side led their schools in singing their alma maters, the referee took the basketball out to the center of the court, accompanied by captains for the home team and the visitors. This year St Paul’s captain was Maggie McCarthy, a junior star player. When the referee blew the whistle and threw the ball up into the air, the two players leaped for it and the game began.

I always went to the girls’ games. My best friend, Patty, was on the team, a great forward. She was like a gazelle, dashing back and forth across the court, so capable and smooth in her movements, stunningly beautiful with her silky hair sweeping the air. She worked well with the other team members, and they liked her. I felt my heart skip a beat when she passed the ball suavely to Maggie, who shot it cleanly into the basket.

When I was a freshman I tried out for the team but didn’t make it. Disappointing. Now seeing how skillfully the girls played, I could never imagine myself doing what they did. I’d felt so clumsy with the ball in comparison. I was convinced of the importance of being a fan.

Maggie McCarthy was tall with auburn hair, a little chunky but a strong, tough player. She was actually from another parish in the Bronx, but she got a scholarship to play on St. Paul’s team, which had a winning reputation. She was a year behind Patty and already the captain. I noticed she didn’t hang with a boyfriend and didn’t flirt like the other popular girls. She seemed very serious about basketball, usually playing forward. On the court she looked completely present, her face focused as she dribbled her way through the players, her sweaty brow wrinkled as she concentrated on a shot. I never felt she was trying to impress anyone, just doing her job. After an especially good play, she hugged Patty or another girl with genuine exuberance. Her bent head suggested an insecurity and introspection I could identify with. Since she was not in my year and I didn’t hang out with her Sweet Shoppe crowd, I never got any closer than watching her on

the court or passing her in the school hallways.

When Patty and I talked about her, it was always in the context of practice or a game. Patty's face would warm and her eyes glisten: "Did you see how Maggie stole the ball from that Cabrini girl and pitched it way across the court?" I never felt threatened by her admiration of Maggie McCarthy because I was Patty's best friend. Patty had other close girlfriends, but she most often chose to be with me. I didn't really like the Sweet Shoppe crowd anyway, even when I ran into some of the girls in the bars on weekends. They were snobs.

Three girlfriends and I trekked across the 196th Street Bridge into Manhattan. From there it was another six or seven blocks to O'Neal's. It was less likely we'd get caught there because people didn't know us in Inwood, a very different neighborhood, almost like we were going into another state. We were seventeen, and the drinking age was eighteen and we used fake IDs. Of course our parents never knew and sometimes it was scary walking the streets in the dark. It wasn't so much that we wanted to drink, it was just where we got together. The stinky smell of beer and the dark, sleazy atmosphere were pretty gross, but it was great to hear the familiar sounds of Vanilla Fudge's "You Keep Me Hangin' On" and other hip songs from the late sixties, and to see friends from school and neighborhood.

Patty had an older girl's ID, and I'd changed the year on a xeroxed copy of my baptismal certificate. The bouncer peered at our proof with his flashlight. He looked up at us, gruffly motioning us inside. "Take it easy, ladies." A long strand of ashes dropped from the cigarette between his lips.

Patty laughed. "We will."

Patty had a friendly, outgoing personality, but she didn't talk to most people about her innermost thoughts and her family problems. I knew another side of Patty. The Patty who took care of her brothers and sisters when her parents were "out of it," the Patty who talked about her insecurities and doubts, the Patty who preached about principles like honesty and devotion. She listened to me in my darkest moments and defended me if someone made fun of me.

It's not that I was a dork or anything. I was just quiet and shy and not especially pretty. I felt out of place among all the Irish kids. My parents seemed old-fashioned and different, probably because they weren't Americans and they spoke Yugoslav. Like the Irish, they came here to make a better life, but most Yugoslavs I knew pined endlessly for their homeland lost to Communism or argued about what happened during World War II. No one else in our school went to the Bohemian Hall in Astoria for Croatian dances on Sundays. I stopped going as a senior, but every once in a while my parents made the whole family parade in to waltz and polka and be seen. I never said

much about that side of my life to my friends at school.

In the dark bar, Patty suddenly noticed some guys we knew. "There's Vinny and Brian," she said, craning her neck and waving to them. I straighten up like I always did around boys, hoping to make up for my lack of looks.

"How's it going, lovely ones?" said Vinny in his charming way.

"Hi there, Patty, Sonja," said Kevin, almost like he had to. I looked around and didn't recognize any of the girls in the bar. They seemed older, tougher—probably Inwood girls. They were what a grown-up would call floozies, loose girls, with their hair piled up in curls, ready to go off with any guy. They lived for drinking vodka tonics and being loud.

"Devil with a Blue Dress On" blared from the jukebox. I liked it when people danced; there was such a warm, "up" atmosphere, and the square wood floor rippled with the spinning lights. It was fine to dance even without a partner. On nights like tonight when there weren't many people at O'Neal's, they didn't turn on the lights in the dancing area. We drank and ate popcorn.

Not much into drinking and pretty much out of luck with boys, I didn't know what to do with myself. The boys I wanted never seemed to be interested in me, maybe because I wanted them from a distance, like Mickey, the drummer for a band that played at St. Paul Friday night dances. He never said hi to me when he saw me, but then again, he didn't even know me.

But Patty... Patty gave me such wonderful attention. We trusted each other. I felt much closer to her than to any guy. Her boyfriend, Bill, usually didn't hang out at the bar; he was at practice or somewhere else with his buddies and would come to O'Neal's toward the end of the night to take Patty home. I had to find someone to take me home too; it was dangerous to go all that way alone.

I liked thinking about romance and love and the possibility of being with some cute guy, but the reality of kissing them was something else. On my rare date-like times with boys, I kissed because they wanted it. Maybe I hadn't come across the right boy yet. I sometimes found myself in awkward situations. Once, Kevin led me up to the top floor of some building I'd never been in and spread his coat on the cold cement floor, wanting to make out. I felt icky about it, but we did it.

Patty lived by Devoe Park. I lived on the other side of the projects. One day as we walked home from school, I got more and more agitated as I talked about the problems I was having with my father. "He just won't let me stay out past midnight, and now he's saying I can't go to so many Friday night dances. I don't get what his problem is!" I felt Patty was in some other world.

"I don't think you really care if I'm your friend, do you?" I demanded, picking a fight.

She looked at me, puzzled: "What are you talking about, Sonja?"

"Just what I said," I yelled. "You wouldn't care if I lived or died!"

We went back and forth, our emotions escalating until I got worried about what passersby might think, but there was no way I could stop the roller coaster.

Patty's softened voice and I barely heard her say, "I love you." I just couldn't take it in at that moment. I was convinced this was the end of our friendship. How could she like me after this outburst? I felt I must have lost the person I cared about more than anyone. When we parted, there were tears in her intense dark eyes, and I was still angry.

I walked home full of regret. I had ruined everything, but she was not the perfect friend I thought she was. Life was not worth living. I just wanted to be by myself down in the basement, turn on the Bee Gees' Greatest Hits and brood.

My father was working in the garden when I got home. I ran up the porch steps, yelling the obligatory, "Hi, Dad." He barely looked up from the soil he was digging. I was glad he didn't have something for me to do. I walked through the hallway back to the kitchen and then to my room and realized I was alone. What a relief that I didn't have to interact with anyone! I got my pen and some flowery stationery and went downstairs.

The record player was already set to go with the Bee Gees, "to love somebody, the way I love you." I let my tears flow.

Then I put on the Byrds, "Turn, Turn, Turn." Yes, there is a season, to everything. The songs helped me pick up my hope, but the big gaping hole in my heart seemed bottomless. I didn't want to fight with Patty. I just couldn't help myself when I felt scared. It happened at home that way too. There was always yelling and picking fights—that's how my parents communicated. But I cared about Patty a lot. I didn't want to hurt her. I wanted things to be different with her.

I began a letter to my best friend. I went over what I thought had happened, then I said how sorry I was for yelling at her. "I love you very much and do not want to lose you." I began to cry again, the songs tugging at my heart.

"I just can't imagine living without you, you're too important to me," I wrote. It was a jumble of feelings, but I knew I had to give her the letter.

We had first met when we both got parts in the school play two years before. It was unbelievable how my life opened up after that. These were kids who were "above me" in status and here I was doing theater with them. I was shocked at first that Patty wanted to be friends—how could she, I wasn't at all popular. We had a lot in

common, though. Our families were both messed up. Her mother had bouts of craziness, and her father had a problem with alcohol. My father was crazy, too, and would lash out, violent like a wild man, sometimes. Because we shared these dark secrets with each other, we felt different from the other girls and that much closer to each other.

The morning after I wrote my letter, Patty was waiting at our usual time to walk to school with me. I didn't expect her to be there. I handed her the letter and didn't say a word. She opened it right then and there.

"Oh, Sonja. It's no big deal. I care about you too. Of course we're still friends. I guess I don't really understand what happened yesterday, but it'll be okay."

Tears surged to my eyes but I blinked them back. She grabbed my arm, "Come on, let's go or we'll be late," she said and from then we were closer than ever.

A year later, at O'Neal's, Patty motioned me. "Come over here and sit down. I want to tell you something."

She led me to an empty table. We sat across from each other with our beer mugs. She was cheerful, flinging her hair behind her right ear and giving a deep laugh that rose gradually to a high girlish squeak. The bar was as dark as a movie theater. I couldn't make out the beautiful features I knew so well—her attentive eyes, the unstraying strokes of her eyebrows, her smooth unblemished skin, her confident mouth.

"I want to tell you something before you hear it from someone else," she spoke seriously. "You're actually the first person I'm telling. To make a long story short, Bill and I are getting engaged."

I felt like a bucket of water had just been dumped on me, or like the loud Jefferson Airplane song playing in the bar had suddenly stopped, or like I was a child lost in the woods who couldn't find her mother. It took me a while to respond. What was I going to say? Maybe I would never see her again.

"That's great," I said weakly.

She talked on about what Bill said when he asked her and what they were planning to do, how excited they were, etc. My mind limped—I'd known this would happen eventually, but not now, not so fast. I felt so alone.

"I'm really happy for you, Patty," I offered, my eyes tearing. I reached out and found her hand on the table. It stayed for a moment under mine, then jerked up to flip back her hair. Didn't she hear the shaking in my voice?

I wrenched myself out of my sorrow. That was all. Everything was changing. Bill came first. They would get married. Then maybe I would get married, and that would be the end of it. We'd go our

separate ways. I didn't even want to get married. The thought of arguing with a man for the rest of my life or dealing with a drunk or someone who worked all the time—what a life! Maybe I'd imagined something more hopeful when I became friends with Patty. What, specifically, I didn't know, but something on a higher level, something more equal.

"I'm going to miss you," I looked down and we sat there for a few minutes in silence. She was going to have a perfect life and I—who knows?

Vinny's voice yelled out from the bar. "Hey, you two, c'mere. I wanna buy yous a drink." Why couldn't he leave us talking by ourselves? I didn't want this intimate moment to end. Didn't we have more to say?

"Be right there," Patty called out. And to me, "We'll still see each other. We'll always be friends. I hope... Why are you staring at me like that? We better go. I just wanted you to be the first to know."

I went up to the bar a few minutes later, but I just couldn't get into the fun again. That night I went home with Richy, a guy who once tried to go out with Patty, but she was loyal to Bill after they started going steady and she never gave anyone else a chance.

What was so great about Bill anyway? He was on the basketball team, tall and popular. I knew his sister, Mary, but to watch them at school you wouldn't think they even lived in the same house. She was a bookworm, and he didn't associate with her. The average girl at St. Paul's thought he was cute, but I didn't think he was anything special.

At the bar Richy asked to walk me home. I said, "Okay, but I have to be home by midnight."

"Sure, I'll get you there," he promised, and to the bartender, "Hey, Charlie, gimme another one." He guzzled down the beer, and we said goodbye to our friends. It made me feel special to go home with a guy. It was important to an image girls had to have.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw Patty at the door waiting to say goodnight. "I'll call you," she said. Our eyes locked.

It was a warm spring night, the streets were quiet. Gangly next to Richy, who was slightly shorter than me, I was also self-conscious about my glasses. Last year one of the senior boys yelled out, "Hi, Four-eyes!" as I passed through the park. The rest of his crowd burst out laughing. My hair was long—it was the sixties—but otherwise, I didn't feel very "with it."

We stopped on the bridge and looked out at the gray river. It smelled dank and fishy. Richy put his arm around me and drew me to him, kissing me. His breath was beery and smoky but that was part of the deal. He was walking me home. His lips closed around mine and circled methodically. His eyes were closed, and mine were too at first,

but then I opened them.

I thought about Patty, wondering if Bill would show up late to pick up his bride-to-be. I wished she and I could hang out more on these nights, but we had to give the guys their attention. I pictured myself congratulating Bill when I saw him. He'd thank me politely. Then he'd put his arm around Patty possessively and I'd feel left out.

Richy stopped kissing me and opened his eyes. I realized his dick was now a hot pole against me. I was nervous about getting home on time. How long would this go on?

"I think we better go. I really have to be home by midnight." I hugged him hurriedly. I was pinned against a rail. "Let's go, Richy, I mean it."

"Aw, come on, a few more minutes won't hurt," he pleaded.

"No, I have to go," I said firmly. "Plus, don't you have stage crew tomorrow morning?" I didn't want him to think I was a prude. He knew my father was strict about how late I stayed out. Besides, I didn't want to be doing all this kissing tonight anyway. I was still thinking about Patty.

Richy and I started walking again. He was slightly drunk and stumbled at first. He talked about how he never wanted to turn forty. He was only eighteen, why on earth was he worrying about forty?

"I wanna stay young," he said as if he wasn't talking to anyone in particular. "I'm going to kill myself if I ever make it to forty."

Was I supposed to comfort him? His face was very red. He had his arm around me. I didn't know what to say. He looked depressed. Maybe I could get by without saying anything. How did I end up kissing someone I couldn't even relate to?

When we finally reached my house, all the lights were out except the one in the vestibule. I was almost home free. My father usually couldn't stay up past nine so he gave my mother orders to make sure I was in before midnight. My mother fell asleep when she wanted to, hoping he wouldn't discover she'd fallen down on the job. I was an expert at being very quiet as I entered the house. Richy and I whispered in the doorway. He took me by the shoulders, then by the waist, and held me tight against his dick, which was still hot. Then he did the circles on my lips again. I just waited for it to be over. He mumbled, "Goodnight, Sonja. See you around."

"Yeah, bye, Richy." I squeezed his hand and let go. "And don't kill yourself yet." I didn't think he heard me.

Sometimes I went to Inwood to hang out with my other close friend, Maria who lived on Dyckman Street. She went to St. Paul's while most of her neighborhood friends went to Sacred Heart in Manhattan. Maria's family was Italian. In many ways I felt closer to her than to the girls at St. Paul's, except for Patty and another friend. I

don't know why, maybe it was the food our mothers cooked or the fact that our families spoke a different language. Anyway, we were close.

Maria liked to play tricks on the nuns in class. I liked her rebellious side even though I was more of a goody-two-shoes. I got good grades and loved to read. Maria and I began to depend on each other. We talked deeply about things like what we would do with our lives after school or how we felt about our families—my father and her mother especially. A firmer and firmer bond grew between us. Besides Maria, only Patty could understand these things about me.

Maria and I had lunch together almost every day during the second half of senior year. Sometimes we walked to Devoe Park just to get away from the school building and all the noise and interruptions. I never felt awkward or inferior around her, but I was a little less scared of her intensity—something about her I couldn't understand. She talked about her "voices" and how they told her things and how confusing this was for her at times. I searched my mind for a similar experience but found nothing.

One sunny day we sat on the park bench. A few mothers with kids were out strolling. The outdoor basketball court was silent, deserted. In twenty minutes it would be filled with boys. On the rail behind our bench, they would soon line up like pelicans, joking about some poor girl or remarking on a baseball play, looking important and moving their heads from side to side. But now we were alone.

"My father is such an asshole!" Maria burst out angrily as we unwrapped our sandwiches. "He totally insulted my brother last night, he threw his dinner in the garbage, and now he won't let me go out this weekend for some stupid reason. I don't know why my mother puts up with him. I get so depressed at home I don't feel like being alive."

"Sounds like my house." I shook my head. Her face was pale and stony, her voice had changed to a monotone. I watched her take the pop-top from her can of Coke, flick off the thin curl, and before I realized what she was doing, she had pressed it firmly against her wrist till it drew blood.

I grabbed the ring out of her hand. "What are you doing? Are you crazy?"

"Yes," she said, laughing.

I wanted to protect her, but it seemed overwhelming, what she was going through. One day after this scary experience, I sat next to her in the lunchroom. I noticed her eyes growing hard as rocks. She looked down at her lap a couple of times as if she were trying to lead my eyes there. She had a pop-top poised at her already marked wrists. Again I grabbed it out of her hand, again she laughed in a creepy way.

Sometimes Maria stayed over at my house because it was closer to school and she would rather be with me than go home. My mother set up a folding bed for her right next to mine. We would get into our pajamas, laughing about the day at school.

“Did you see the look on Bernadette’s face?” Maria said that night, her eyes gleaming as she spoke about the nun who taught us French. She “seemed to have forgotten all about the pop-top incident. “It was so great when our two rows started swinging seats at the same time. She didn’t know what was goin’ down. Maybe she thought she was losin’ it.”

She imitated Sister Bernadette screaming, “Stop it, stop it!” We laughed like kids.

Maria was tall with brown eyes and short brown hair. Her skin had a slight olive tone, and her smile drew you in. She wasn’t one of the popular girls, but she was friendly and well liked, smart but not too interested in school. I always admired her proud posture and, also, her breasts, which were bigger than my nothings.

I felt her gaze as we stood in my bedroom one night. She caught my eyes, then I saw her looking at the rest of me. Something stirred in my pelvis.

“Can I hug you, Sonja? I’m so glad you’re my friend. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” her voice was soft and full of some kind of yearning. I went to her. She held me. She felt so good, the sweet warmth of her breasts against me. Overcome by shyness, I know I needed something but didn’t know what. When we parted, she kissed me lightly on the lips.

I felt confused afterwards, under the covers alone. I wanted her with me. It didn’t seem right for her to be so far away in the next bed after what just happened. I wondered if she too felt scared. I turned over on my side to face her. Her eyes still open, she watched me as she lay under her covers. The street lamps lit my lavender room like moonlight. I saw her smile.

We talked a little more from our beds.

“Are you okay?”

“Do you have enough covers?”

“Did you set the alarm?”

“My mom’s going to wake us up.”

I didn’t know if I could sleep, but I did.

What was I supposed to do about these stirrings inside me? I felt them at odd moments while walking or even talking with Patty, or dancing with Maria at one of the bars. I had heard the word “lezzie” used hatefully. I knew I wasn’t one of those and didn’t want to be. I got the message that these feelings I was having for Patty and Maria were not right. I never spoke of them to anyone. I was ashamed. I set

them aside.

My senior year was a hard one for me. I lost Patty to Bill. I lost Maria too. It was all Miss Martini's fault. We'd never had a guidance counselor at St. Paul's before that year. She was fresh out of college and raring to practice her psychology on us. Maria went to see her about some routine matter but ended up telling her about the voices and her wrists. Miss Martini asked to see her once a week.

Maria's home life got worse and worse. Her mother, who was freaking out about her own life, called Miss Martini one day. She railed on about Maria, who had tried to kill herself. Then Maria's mother, who should really have committed herself, along with Miss Martini, who thought she was God, actually committed Maria to Bronx State Hospital. Maria's friends and I were in shock. I went to see her a few times, but she seemed drugged and not herself in that place with all those people. It was very sad.

Years later after Maria was released from the hospital, she contacted me. I was married and living in a nice apartment in Greenwich Village, trying very hard to be a professor's wife. High school seemed like a different world to me.

"Sonja," said Maria earnestly, "remember that poem you wrote me in senior year, the 'Rose Poem?'" I remembered it well. A love poem. Why was she bringing it up now, after all this time?

I felt uncomfortable and wanted to get off the phone. Maria sounded strange. I tried changing the subject. She persisted.

"Sonja, I have some new friends."

I said I was happy for her. Why did she sound so mysterious?

"They're lesbians," she said.

Was she trying to shock me? I didn't want to hear that word. Wait, was she a lesbian?

Then I heard her say, "Do you want to get together?"

I paused and said no. Her life was so marginal and dangerous compared to mine, with my husband, my apartment and my track to a Ph.D. How could I give that up? I felt sad and torn because I still loved Maria—we had shared so much—but it was all too scary.

Patty and I remained friends through our various life experiences and hardships. She raised two beautiful children and eventually split up with Bill. She had a career in business management and computers, told me she was involved with another man and they planned to marry soon.

While I too got married, shortly after Patty and Bill, I had no children. My husband and I too eventually split up; I left him for a woman. When I told Patty at one of our get togethers that I was a lesbian and that she was the first girl I fell in love with, she looked away, flipped her hair behind her ear, and said, "Wow, I feel

honored.”

One day Maggie McCarthy, Patty’s teammate from St. Paul’s, called her out of the blue, after twenty two years! Maggie was in San Francisco for a visit, did Patty want to meet her for dinner? Of course.

She called me right after their reunion to tell me about it. She sounded excited. “And you’ll never believe what came out.” She paused. Somehow I knew, but I said, “What?”

“I knew it before she even said anything,” Patty chattered on. “How’s your mother?” I asked. ‘Okay,’ Maggie said, ‘but we don’t get along anymore. You see, Patty, I’m a lesbian.’ I said, ‘I knew it! That’s great!’”

It was fun to be the one approving and affirming someone else’s positive reaction.

“I wish I could have been a fly on the wall,” I said feeling a little jealous. “Did you tell her about me?”

“Oh, of course, how could I not? You know, Maggie had some fascinating observations about me at the time, while we were at St. Paul’s.”

“I’m sure she did,” I said with a little sarcasm, but she didn’t seem to notice.

When I went back to New York once to visit my family, I tried to find Maria’s name in the phone book. First I tried the Manhattan directory, but her family must have moved away. Then I took a chance and tried the Bronx book—there she was. I dialed, my heart quickening. The voice on the answering machine was definitely hers. I didn’t leave a message, but tried again later.

“Sonja,” she said so sweetly, recognizing my “Hello, Maria,” her voice rising at first, then falling slightly, the same way she used to say my name so many years ago. She seemed so glad to hear from me. We chatted about our lives. She was a nurse now and had just split up with a woman. I told her I was a lesbian. She said, “I’m not surprised.” We laughed.

Then I told her how sorry I was when years back I said no about getting together.

“Oh, that’s nothing,” Maria said. “I understood.”

Escapeto America

How my parents came to America is a story fraught with the politics of their country, Yugoslavia, and of World War II and its aftermath in Europe.

My mother's older cousin Ivo tells this story: Hands cuffed behind his back, he was standing on the deck of a ship docked on the island of Krk, then part of Yugoslavia just before the Nazis took over. The ship was to take him to a prison in Rome. He had been accused of writing pro-Tito, pro-Communist graffiti on the town wall. The graffiti angered the Italian Fascists, who were in control of some Adriatic Sea islands and Croatian towns along the coast; they didn't want anyone to get away with showing support for the Partisans. Local people were divided about who deserved their allegiance. Many looked away in disapproval as they passed Ivo standing on the ship awaiting his fate.

Word got to my mother, Liza, thirteen at the time and her brother Pete, a year younger. They ran to the harbor from their village of Sveti Vid (St. Vitus) as soon as they heard the news that their cousin had been captured and was to be taken away. They stood there on the dirt shore, wanting to go to him, but they could only wave as the ship pulled away. They knew enough about the politics of the times to understand that it was risky to be associated with Ivo, who was an "enemy of the people," but they waved and he never forgot their bravery and concern. He could not know then that he would be able to repay them when they were in trouble some years ahead.

Yugoslavia was a young country, created in 1918, at the end of World War I, as a merger of the Kingdom of Serbia and various ethnic states of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1941, the Nazis conquered it, following the Italian Fascists. Other forces vying for power at the time were the Chetniks, a predominantly Serbian nationalist group, and the Partisans who were fighting a guerrilla war organized by Josip Broz Tito. The royalists, loyal to King Peter, and the Ustashe, Nazi supporters, were also part of the mix. But, as my mother said later, all these forces "were just killing their own people."

During the invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941, the king's army, including my father, a Montenegrin living in Serbia, defended their country with swords against the Nazis with guns. Ethnic Balkan conflicts were in full swing during World War II, the Croats and Serbs and other small nationalities taking the opportunity to air their historic hurts and act with a vengeance. Tito's partisans eventually won control. The new Yugoslavia would be a Communist state, remaining independent of the Soviet Union and Stalin. The Partisans had fought for a new unified Yugoslavia free from foreign domination,

and they had won.

For my mother, the days of the Nazi occupation of the Adriatic island of Krk were terrifying. Soldiers ransacked the village, taking the food and valuables the people had set aside for their own survival. One day when the Nazis descended on the village, my great-grandmother, hearing that the Nazis often raped the young women or took them away, quickly gave my fifteen-year-old mother some wine she had, to make her seem disabled. When the Nazis came to the door, my mother, who was not used to alcohol, slurred her words and rolled her eyes and they left, repelled.

Out of touch with her immediate family, who were safe in New York, my mother was happy to stay with her grandmother in the village. The family was just temporarily away and would soon come back. Then the war broke out and life became a struggle for survival. Every so often a care package might make it through the battle lines for someone in the village, which quickly became known to all the villagers. The food would be consumed before you could blink an eye. Villagers were forbidden by the occupiers to fish because of curfews and a ban on the use of flashlights.

Everything was in short supply including shoes. While my mother played the accordion for village events, her friend Mary had a beautiful soprano voice. Once, when they were supposed to parade into church to perform, Mary turned to my mother at the last moment and said, "I have no shoes and I am first in line. Give me your shoes." It was much more important that Mary have shoes because she would be seen first. As they entered the church vestibule and the music was about to begin, Liza (my mother) took off her shoes and Mary quickly put them on. Still friends as grown women years later in the Bronx, they'd laugh about it.

I asked my grandparents when they were old, what they felt during that time of separation from their children who were in a war zone. They said, of course they had no idea such a vicious war would occur in Europe. They constantly worried about the news, so far away from their house in the Bronx near Yankee Stadium. Their son and daughter were in the utmost danger, and with no word from them, they feared the worst.

Liza and Pete, her brother, were actually born in New York in 1929 and 1930 at the start of the Great Depression. My grandfather, working in a foundry, felt he could better provide for his wife and three children by sending them back home to Sveti Vid, Krk, with money, which would go a much longer way there than in New York. Then he lost his job, and for a few years my grandfather went back to the village. He built the only house with a flush toilet before returning to New York. My grandmother and the three little ones stayed in Sveti

Did, and then came two more after visits from my grandfather. Eventually it got to be too much for my grandmother—the village gossip about ties to America and her husband being away, the five children she had to manage—so she planned to rejoin him in New York with the children. Things were getting better in the States and he had a good job as a carpenter at New York University. It was 1939, and Europe was rumbling.

Little Liza, my mother, only ten then, begged to stay with her grandmother, whom she loved. She wanted to continue playing her accordion and going to school with her friends, but most of all she didn't want to part with her special grandmother. My mother remained with her grandmother and little Pete with his other grandmother. This was to be temporary. They could go to school on the island for one more year, perhaps, and then they come to New York. That was what my grandparents thought when they left.

When the war went into full swing shortly after, it grew impossible even to communicate. Although the tiny village of 350 seemed insignificant in the large scheme of things, it was used by both the Italians and the Nazis as a base and source of supplies. After both grandmothers died, the two children left behind were for all intents and purposes orphaned. They lived with their uncle and his new wife, and it was nine years before they saw their parents again, who were in grief and extreme anxiety about their children.

Meanwhile, my father, Kosta, in a different part of Yugoslavia, serving in King Peter's Serbian army as an equestrian and swordsman, was captured by the Nazis in battle in northeastern Yugoslavia and taken to northern Germany to a work camp. In those terrible years after 1941, Yugoslavia was in thrall to the Nazis and their collaborators. The Balkan Jews were rounded up and the Nazis thought almost as little of the Slavs—they were lowlife among the pure Aryan race.

Kosta was a sergeant, and along with other officers he was forced in barracks and told to work on the farms around a rural town called Heiden. My father fell in love with the area. He proceeded to make friends with the farmers he worked for and he flirted with Agnes, one of their daughters. One day the kisses went a step further and Agnes became pregnant. A scandal ensued. Her parents were incensed that their daughter had been impregnated by a dirty Slav ("race-mixing" was against German law) and accused him of rape. At a trial, my father was sentenced to three years in a harsh prison in Essen that he later referred to as a concentration camp.

In 1945, when Europe was liberated by the Allies, Yugoslavia won its freedom and became a Communist country with Josip Broz Tito at its head. He was able to unify the Slovenians, the Serbs, the

Croats, the Bosnians, the Macedonians, and other ethnic groups, and to organize the rebuilding of Yugoslavia. People were hopeful they would have their lives back.

After his release from prison, my father never went back to Aleksinac, where he grew up (whose only distinction is that it was the first place U.S. forces in NATO mistakenly bombed during the 1998 war that finally split Yugoslavia after Tito's death.) In the spirit of rejuvenating the country, my father's brother Marko, a bricklayer, volunteered for a brigade that repaired the devastation left by the war in Yugoslavia. My father's favorite brother was supporting Communism, something my father, ever a king's supporter and anti-Communist, never knew.

Meanwhile my mother and Uncle Pete, still living with their uncle and his wife in Sveti Vid, were preparing to escape and rejoin their family. They had been denied permission to leave, even though Liza had written letters to Comrade Tito, pleading to be allowed to rejoin their beloved family in New York, where they were born. She wondered if her letters ever reached him; later she learned that they had been intercepted by a particular villager who had risen in the Communist Party ranks to a government position and had blocked their exits because of some old vendetta.

Uncle Dom helped Liz and Pete make their escape to the opposite shores of Italy. He brought them to a little boathouse a few miles from their village where they waited for a small boat. This had been arranged and paid for by him. After leaving them there, he went back home only to learn that that it would be another day before the boat was to arrive. He returned to the boathouse that evening with some food because he knew his niece and nephew would be frightened. Despite the curfew he got on his bicycle with some food for them and hugged them one more time. As he was returning in the dark, he was taken and jailed by local police for breaking curfew.

When the young brother and sister reached the Italian coastal town of Ancona, they were asked for papers. How could they prove their U.S. citizenship? The police thought they were lying and put them both in jail. Liza, now eighteen, sat in a cell peopled with prostitutes and thieves, crying in a corner until a nun who was a guard in the girls' section asked her why she wouldn't eat. In the Italian she learned during the occupation, Liza said she was going home to her parents. The nun was so moved by her story that she arranged a visit with the warden nun, who insisted that the teenagers were political prisoners. Liza pleaded, saying she had a relative in Rome who could confirm her story. When she was allowed to contact Ivo, the same cousin who had been taken to an Italian prison five years earlier, he came immediately, bringing papers from the

consulate in Rome.

In 1948, events had come full circle. Ivo was thrilled to help the two young cousins who had given him such support years earlier. He treated them to good meals and cultural events in Rome while they awaited arrangements to go to New York. He was studying art history and preparing to be an academic, and they had a good time with him, but they were ready to move on.

At last they took off on a propeller plane to London and then to New York. They landed at LaGuardia Airport, but because of the time difference, no one met them—their family had the wrong time of arrival. Liza hailed a taxi to take them to the Bronx, to the address she showed the driver on a piece of paper. She didn't know a word of English. By luck the driver was Italian, and she knew enough to speak to him. When they arrived at her family's house on Cedar Avenue, she asked the driver to wait. She and Pete walked up to the door and knocked. Her mother answered and started screaming, crying, waving her arms, calling her husband's name, overcome by the sight of her two beloved children, after nine years. My grandfather came to the door; they all hugged. He didn't forget to pay the Italian taxi driver.

My mother began her new life in the land of her birth. At times, when she was alone, she wept because she couldn't communicate in English. She missed her village life, the accordion she left behind, her uncle, aunt and friends. Playing the piano in the house helped.

My father came to the States shortly after my mother. He was sent to New York after the liberation because he had a relative there and he could start a new life, after what he had to endure.

This was my parents' start in a new land, after much suffering in the old country. Their hopes and dreams were just beginning in New York. They met shortly thereafter. And that's another story.

Imperfect Glass

I grew up in New York but didn't speak any English until I picked it up in first grade. My parents were from Yugoslavia. We spoke only Serbo-Croatian and we didn't have a TV. We socialized with family and other Yugoslavs. As a toddler, I would sit in the window of our kitchen and people would wave to me as they went through the yard to the elevator.

My parents met in 1950 after they emigrated to the United States and found jobs at the central Horn and Hardart retail food factory in Manhattan on 57th St. and West Side Drive. My mother packed donuts and cakes; my father maintained the furnaces. His first job was as a garbage packer, but the sight of food being thrown away in such large quantities made him physically ill. After years in a Nazi concentration camp, where starvation was his daily companion, he was throwing away food for a living. Needing so badly to work and make a living he nevertheless took the risk of asking his boss if he could have another job.

"Mr. Hardart," he began. At the time family businesses were common, and the owner of this company actually knew his workers.

"Mr. Hardart," my father said in his halting accented English. "I spent three years in concentration camp in Germany. I can't see the food in the garbage. It's too much. It makes me sick. I will do anything, anything else—wash toilets or any dirty job—just not this."

Mr. Hardart understood, "I'll see what I can do for you, Kosta." My father became a stationary engineer in training on the night shift.

After her odyssey to New York from her village in Krk, my mother arrived in New York which to her looked like a jungle. It was so exotic and chaotic after her life in a small village. In the Bronx, her family had a nice little house overlooking the Harlem River, with a garden and even a goat, reminiscent of the old country. This softened the trauma for her. although she often sat at home in tears, unable to communicate with her American sister and brother, and feeling the loss of her village life, her grandmother, her home.

Dad met Mom, while cruising the assembly line one day, and was immediately determined to make her his wife. Their opposing political views—she supported Tito and the partisans, he was "a King's man"—didn't seem important. (King Peter, who was in power during World War II, was the last king of Yugoslavia and was deposed by Tito's Communist government in 1945.) In addition, she was Croatian and Roman Catholic, he was Serb and Eastern Orthodox. He let none of this get in his way. He even agreed to convert to Roman Catholicism as my grandmother requested. My mother liked him—he was

handsome and personable—and she thought she should get married.

My parents had a formal wedding and fancy reception, the way immigrant Yugoslavs did in those days in New York. Then they took a honeymoon trip to Miami by bus. My mother later told me how shocked my father was at the racism he saw traveling to the South: “Black people have to ride at the back of the bus, and I am an immigrant and sit where I want?”

When they returned home they settled in the Bronx, first on Creston Avenue near Fordham Road, then Loring Place near the 207th Street bridge to Manhattan, in St. Nicholas of Tolentine parish, where I and my siblings were to go to Catholic school.

I was born in 1952, a year after they married, then my sister the next year, and finally my brother. It was important to my father to have a son. Seven years later another baby girl was born. My parents worked hard to make life easier for us children, to overcome their own difficult pasts, and to build a future for us. I tried to understand them, but the legacy of their suffering brought me suffering too.

My parents argued a lot. Some of their fiercest fights seemed to be about politics and religion or what dialect was the proper one to teach the children. I remember being very quiet as a child, partly because my father worked the night shift and slept during the day. At times my parents’ shouting would overwhelm me. I would retreat and quietly cry. I am content with quiet now. It was how I survived.

We grew up in scarcity. My father didn’t earn much money and he had three children to feed. When Dad brought home an “expired” steak from Horn and Hardart’s one day, it was a treasure. It wasn’t clear how he got it; maybe he simply stole it. He told us they were going to throw it out, so he asked if he could take it home to his family. My Mom broiled it in an electric broiler till the kitchen had a burnt smell. We sat around the table while Mom mashed the potatoes and Dad took his fork and a big knife and carefully carved up the steak. He gave each of us three kids equal portions, he set aside the fat and meat around the bones for himself, and gave Mom a slightly smaller piece than ours. When one of us noted this and she said, “I don’t really like too much meat.”

My parents were involved in what was later considered illegal activity—helping immigrants. People would come for a visit from Yugoslavia and not go back. My mother would feed them and my father would help them get a job. Then these strangers would find a way to stay and have a life here. I remember a short, bald Macedonian man who spoke in a funny dialect I didn’t recognize (not Serbian or Croatian) and reeked of garlic. We would watch him chew whole cloves—it was healthy, he said. For years he slept on a single bed my father set up in the basement of our building near the boiler room. My

parents couldn't get rid of him. He said he was saving money to send to his family in Yugoslavia. One day he asked my mother to take a picture of him beside a shiny red Ford Fairlane parked on Loring Place. He sent the picture home to Macedonia and told them it was his car. Our building, where my parents worked as superintendents, seemed like the Underground Railroad for immigrants.

With his kinky hair, pencil-thin mustache, and dark skin, my father was often mistaken for Puerto Rican. I was glad I didn't hear people saying that Yugoslavians were lazy, dirty and "they have a lot of children," although I did hear a lot of jokes about Poles—how dumb they were, mainly. Wasn't this country built by slaves and immigrants? Yugoslav, Czech, and Polish immigrants had worked in most of the mines in this country in the early part of the century and some relatives of my father's had even emigrated to Butte, Montana, to work in the copper mines.

Although Puerto Rico had been a U.S. territory a long time ago, it was even difficult for people from there to make it in New York. I remember Dad helping a man named Charlie, a dark-skinned Puerto Rican. Charlie's big smile and pleasant, calm personality brightened up our small kitchen as he ate with us. My father found him odd jobs and eventually a superintendent position. Charlie eventually was able to get a green card and bring his family to New York. Later I found out that Puerto Ricans didn't need a green card, so maybe Charlie was Dominican.

The superintendent deal was good for us because we got free rent and phone and utilities, and Dad had the opportunity of getting paid for doing extra jobs in the building. This was added income really necessary for a family of five and then six. My mother did as much as she could to help. She took calls and complaints, she polished the brass doorknobs and mailboxes on Saturdays, and mopped the six floors every week with ammonia and water. I used to like to help her with the brass polishing. It was so satisfying to see the dull fingerprinted boxes become gold and shiny with some rubbing after Mom had spread the milky polish on them.

As superintendent, my father found a lot of things in the garbage and resurrected them for us. One day he told us that someone upstairs in the building wanted to give us a piano. I wanted to take lessons at school, so this was perfect. That piano gave me much solace, and it was a creative outlet, even though it could go nowhere else but in the hallway opposite the door to the apartment. When our youngest sister was just a toddler, she would sit on my lap and we would play up a storm together. Later when we moved, the piano couldn't come to our new house because, as my father said, "It's full of roaches!" That was heartbreaking. I loved that piano. I used to imagine myself playing

Rachmaninov, throwing my long hair around, with a big orchestra accompanying me at Carnegie Hall.

As a child, I never told anyone about my fantasies. They were my own private world, a world in which I could be in control. I would play out different scenarios, taking the part of people I considered strong figures in the world—conductor of an orchestra, father of a family, a nun teaching a class, president of the United States. I created an imaginary box that I drew the boundaries of. It was my place, sometimes just the size of my body, sometimes the house or school in my stories. It was a hiding place from other children, a refuge from my parents' emotions. It was enough.

Years later, the sun sparkles on the opposite bank of a river, where I am writing this. I sit on a large rock. The long green grass gleams greener. Rocks expose moss. Water trickles past them without a care. I look ahead and the water stills like imperfect glass.

The slightest ripples reflect everything possible.



Pigeons of Heiden

It's 1996, fifty-five years after the capture of Yugoslavia by the Nazis and my father's imprisonment in Germany. I am in Heiden, meeting my German sister for the first time, after learning about her from my mother, long after my father's death. Monika tells me she has been waiting to hear from our family for a long time. She shows me her scrapbook of pictures of us that my father had sent from New York.

I don't know why Kosta, my father, kept Monika's existence a secret from me and my siblings. He had corresponded with her over the years, but he never asked her to come to America, even after her mother died. Perhaps it was because we were poor. The only time she, his first child, ever met him was after the war and before he left for America. Supposedly he asked her mother, Agnes, to marry him and come with him to the U.S. Monika was only four years old at the time. I am struck by how much Monika's walk resembles my father's—the dark Yugoslav girl among blond Aryans.

In April of 1941, during the Nazi takeover of Yugoslavia, amid the chaos of hand-to-hand combat, bombs, and gunfire, twenty-four-year-old Kosta, a sergeant in King Peter's army, riding his horse and using a sword to defend himself, was taken prisoner along with his troops. They were sent to different prisons in Germany, to be used in various ways. My father and other officers were brought to Heiden, a quiet northern agricultural town close to the Netherlands to be farmworkers. Relatively free to come and go within the area, Kosta had a love affair with Agnes, a farmer's daughter, and Monika was their child.

After the scandal over her pregnancy, my father was tried and sent to a high-security prison in Essen. There he barely survived, eating grass and raw potatoes when he could get work in the kitchen. He also remembered sitting on his bunk talking to a fellow inmate across the way when a bomb suddenly fell on the prison killing the other man. *Blood escapes, the brain cuts off, the body shuts down, and no life.* Did my father ever want to give up on life? There were dangers from many sources as he counted his days in prison.

As I sit with Monika and her husband Manfred, trying to communicate with translation help from her daughter, Silke, her son, Benno, and his girlfriend, Marion, all English speakers, a special guest arrives and greets me warmly and excitedly. I am told she is a neighbor and knew my father when he was in prison in Heiden. Mrs. Schubert was a teenager in 1941. We sit in Monika's tidy living room and Mrs. Schubert tells us what really happened.

“There were about thirty prisoners of war. They were the elite, officers, mostly, and from different countries—France, Russia, England, and of course Yugoslavia. Kosta was assigned to our farm. We all liked him right away. He was hardworking, handsome, and very friendly. We were not supposed to talk with the prisoners, only give orders, but we did anyway.”

I look at the photographs she shows us, of the barracks ringed with barbed wire. The five German guards even look relaxed. They are laughing, not the usual pictures you see of Nazi prison scenes.

A pleasant friendly woman, Mrs. Schubert has an almost square face accented by glasses. Her gray hair is nicely coifed. She wears a dark longish skirt and matching vest, with a shirt buttoned up to the top. We all sit on the two couches on either side of Mrs. Schubert, who is in an armchair; a large coffee table is between us. Yoshi, the family dachshund, sits near Monika on the floor. Everyone listens intently.

“I went into the barracks to take a look once. The prisoners had everything they needed. It was not cruel or severe living conditions. And Kosta was a very fun-loving man. He learned German quickly. He was assigned to our farm, and Agnes Berger was the daughter of the farmer next door to us. In Heiden, Kosta was treated like part of our family, the Meirecke family. We didn’t notice anything between them—the neighbor girl, Agnes, and Kosta—but we think it happened in the tool shed.”

She laughs lightly at this most serious moment—when Monika was conceived and my father’s serious troubles began, almost costing him his life.

The farms were large and elaborate then. *Heimathaus*, the farmhouse where Monika grew up, is now a museum. The main house and the barn, both large two-story buildings, are bricked and sturdy, nothing like our building in the Bronx, where my father’s elaborate tool shed was like a room of his own. Proud of his tools, he hung and arranged them with special care. I would sometimes find him there lost in meditation. Did his own tool shed recall the place where he had a romance with Agnes?

Mrs. Schubert pauses and asks me about Kosta. I tell her he died fourteen years ago of a heart attack, only a year and a half after my youngest sister’s death in a car accident. I tell them all about his love for animals and farm life, how he recreated it in New York.

My father loved animals, and especially pigeons and doves. At our house on Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx, we had grassy lots on both sides of the house. He took care of his birds and gave them a home. We moved there from a three-room basement apartment building where he was superintendent. For my father, I think the house was a chance to relive his peasant life in Serbia. He had a garden and even

grew tomatoes. He raised chickens. He liked trading in chickens and getting different breeds, as well as collecting varieties of pigeons and doves. He had ducks and even peacocks. A certain tenderness emerged when he was with his birds. He loved dogs too, but it wasn't the same.

Our first dog, Lassie, was adored by all of us. Part collie and part Doberman pinscher, she was a black medium-haired, lighthearted dog with a white-and-tan ring around her neck. She loved playing with us children, shepherding us, making sure we were OK when we played in the yard of the six-story building we first lived in. She would even let us ride her like a horse. Once, she saved our building and our lives from a fire, when we awoke one night to her persistent barking and my parents found a raging fire in the boiler room. Lassie had puppies, several litters, which we fawned over until we had to see them off to other people.

"Oh yes," says Mrs. Schubert, "he loved animals here too. He took such good care of ours. People said he communicated with them."

When we moved to the house on Sedgwick Avenue, my father began getting German shepherds and a kind of darkness set in. He kept them outside, and they seemed to be his alone. There were two and sometimes three, and he would beat them to discipline them. It was painful to hear, and I felt an identification with them. In those years on Sedgwick Avenue, there was violence, distance, a preoccupation in him we never understood. His rage toward my mother and us older children seemed to increase and mirror the dogs' situation. If the dogs were an acting-out of his Nazi prison camp suffering, then we were too.

I did not feel close to my father in my teenage years because he nearly beat me to death. My brother Tommy was very much abused and humiliated, too. My sister Nada somehow escaped with her friends, but one time he heartlessly shut her out of the house for being late. Besides the physical violence, there was yelling and paranoia and dysfunctional communication, and even an affair. By the time of her fatal car accident, my youngest sister Gina had managed to find an apartment of her own, which she shared with a friend. We, her siblings, had grown up and left, while she was alone with my parents. No matter how cherished she was as the youngest, she needed some relief from my father and the intensity at home.

Mrs. Schubert is surprised: "But he was not violent here. His reputation was so different. He was such a friendly, warm, good-hearted person. Everybody knew that." She glances at Monika who says she never heard about a violent side of him and is shocked. I feel sad and wonder about these two Kostas—the one before the prison camp and the one after.

I wait at the edge of my seat for all the translation and

clarification of details to settle. All my father ever said about his time in Germany was that he was a POW in Heiden and afterwards he was put in a harsh concentration camp. And this story: it was towards the end of the war when he was to be moved to another camp. During the transfer in the countryside, my father fell down feigning death. Convinced he was dead, the Nazi soldiers left him there. When they were gone, he ventured to move and then began to run. Soon he came to a small house and saw a young woman outside sweeping. He approached hesitantly and asked if she could get him some food and water. Then he asked if she could possibly get him a cigarette. She disappeared and he heard a male voice in conversation.

Regretting his foolish request, he chided himself for asking for the cigarette. When the door opened, he couldn't believe his eyes! The man who stood there was someone he knew. It was one of his own Yugoslav troops, now living in Germany. After the initial excitement, the man and woman asked Kosta to undress outside because he was filthy and full of lice. They helped him until the liberation. He went on to serve in the postwar release of prisoners.

I want to hear more from Mrs. Schubert.

"Well, about Kosta and Agnes, no one noticed anything in particular between them until Agnes's sister was called as a witness in the trial at the end of 1941. Agnes was seventeen, underage, and the mother hysterically accused Kosta of rape at the trial. Whether he was convicted of sexual misconduct or of sexual relations with a minor, it is unclear. The fact that he was a Serb and a POW made the conviction a sure thing."

The Nazis considered Slavs to be subhuman and put laws in place to preserve "racial hygiene and purity," which meant that all Aryans were forbidden to have relations with non-Aryans.

"Because of her mother's behavior at the trial, Agnes was never able to speak on her own behalf. There were two trials, in Borken and in Munster. Kosta was sentenced to five years and, luckily he was not sentenced to death. A scandal about the pregnancy ensued in the village. Agnes was sent to a convent to give birth to Monika, who was immediately taken away by Aunt Asta. Kosta was sent to a prison for criminals in Essen .

"Agnes's parents were extremely upset, especially her mother. But he had no defense. He was a prisoner and he was a Yugoslav. It was against the law then. He was a friendly and handsome man. People liked Kosta. They called him Franz."

Mrs. Schubert seems to enjoy talking about my father, and even remembering those hard times. Her eyes twinkle.

"After the liberation, Kosta immediately returned to Heiden and came bounding through the fields from the train station, even hugging

people on his way. He looked wonderful, not starved and ragged. But he and Agnes had to meet secretly because there was still resentment. He came again after that, before going to America, to ask Agnes and Monika to come with him. She said no—it was just too difficult for her to leave the farm and her family.”

Only eleven years old when her mother died, Monika did not know many of these details until a year later, when Mrs. Schubert’s mother told her the whole story “in the kindest way.” Monika learned about the accusations, the conviction, and even the letters from her father that Agnes never gave her, and she began writing to him in New York.

When I first learned that Kosta had relations with a German woman during World War II, I thought how bitter it must have made him, about women in general and what it all cost him. Did he suffer from guilt those three years in the Essen prison and later with us? The incident in Heiden and its aftermath damaged him. He was a womanizer during their marriage, my mother has told me.

On this trip, I’ve found out that my father was not in a concentration camp at all, but a criminal prison, though with all the same horror stories of hard labor and harsh conditions. Toward the end of my trip, my nephew, Benno, takes me to Essen to visit the prison, soon to be torn down, so I can see the place where my father suffered so because of his mistake—a dark, stony place in the middle of the city. It’s so different from the farmstead where Monika grew up, where Kosta worked. I am glad to have breathed the the air of that place our father spoke of so fondly.

Before Mrs. Schubert leaves, she presents me with a letter from Kosta to her father, who used to visit him in the Essen prison. At the time it was astonishing that any German would do such a thing—visit a convicted Yugoslav criminal in the big city of Essen to bring him food and news. The Meirecke family must really have believed in him as a person and even loved him. The letter is in German in my father’s hand.

Monika was separated from her mother at birth and given to a nurse for two years, because her grandmother did not want her to bond with Agnes. When Agnes died, Monika was shunted from relative to relative, finally landing with with her Uncle Willy. Since Monika never saw our father except for the two visits when she was four years old, I ask after Mrs. Schubert leaves, “Are you angry or sad that you were orphaned and Kosta never sent for you?” She says, “There were many other young people in similar circumstances in Germany after the war.”

Monika, Manfred, and I take a walk around Heiden (which means “heathen”) and we come to a park with a large pigeon coop in the

center. We stroll around and look at the different pigeons. I can say simple sentences to my sister and her husband because of Monika's knowledge of Plattdeutsch, a German dialect directly related to English.

"Kosta loved pigeons," I tell them. They like hearing about him from me. "He had many, many pigeons." Monika and Manfred laugh and nod their heads. Was this pigeon "haus" Kosta's inspiration for his pigeon coop in the Bronx? Later when we're with Benno and Marion, so they could translate, I tell them the peacock story.

On Sedgwick Avenue, my father built a large coop for his doves under the porch, where I often sat writing and watching the sunset over the Harlem River. The rumble of murmuring doves below me escalated when he entered their abode to commune with them. I'd hear him cooing and talking softly to them, then he'd appear with one of them, rubbing the soft feathers on his cheek, his lips moving in intimacies. His gentleness with the birds was not like anything else. My mother envied it, as she told me in sorrowful moments of frustration with my father. They used me as an intermediary in their conflicts, and my mother often sent by into the lion's den to help make peace. I feared his moods less as I learned to pump up my courage. He would tell me things to convey to my mother, in a rough way, nothing like his relationship to the birds.

Sometimes he tried to engage us in conversation about his various pigeons, bringing one down from the large green treehouse with many apartments. He said they created families. One time he pointed out a gay pigeon couple to my mother. He knew they were both males but noticed they were trying to make a nest, so he helped them out by donating a small egg from another bird. Though I don't know how many birds and doves he had, there were many and he knew them all individually.

But the peacocks—oh the peacocks! They were special. In the process of trading birds, Kosta got a pair of them and built them a big cage. During the day they paraded around the lawn like royalty. Such magnificent birds! Sometimes they called out their typical peacock's cry, even there in the Bronx. My father said they were very connected as a couple and that was how they had to be bought and traded.

One day the male with the beautiful plumes was stolen when he walked out of the yard following a chicken. A neighbor saw some young men throw a blanket over him to take him away. My father searched everywhere. He called the police and notified the Bronx Zoo. He couldn't sleep for days after Major went missing. The pining female cried mournfully, missing her mate. Finally, after a couple of weeks, Major was heard sounding his fog-horn cry, while wandering into a house in Riverdale, an upper-class community not far from our

neighborhood.

The *Riverdale Press* reported that when Kosta came to the house to pick Major up, "it was like a meeting of two old friends." The large bird flapped his wings and jumped into my father's arms when they saw each other, and my father was so elated that he couldn't stop hugging the bird.

The farms in Heiden are so lush and green and abundant no wonder he loved this place. Having grown up in a Yugoslav peasant family, he was skilled with livestock and horses, workhorses very different from his army horse, Nestor. At our place in the Bronx he hung a picture of himself in uniform on the rearing Nestor, a dashing heroic picture from another era. He often talked of the farms and people of Heiden, especially the farmer he worked for, Mr. Mierecke. Mrs. Schubert's kind father and brother and uncle were the only visitors my father had during his three years in prison.

When my sister died, a very private sadness issued from my father, perhaps some memory, or a hopelessness after so much progress in America. Perhaps he remembered getting the letter from the German farmer he had befriended in Heiden, as he languished in the prison in Essen. The letter announcing the news of his parents' death in the small town of Aleksinac also came that day. He was not able to see his beloved parents before their death, and he believed they died of grief. In 1983, my father had one heart attack and then second and died.

This is the letter my father wrote in German to Mrs. Schubert's father.

June 16, 1944

Dear Mr. Meierecke,

After such a long time, I finally got your letter on the tenth of this month and I felt very lucky. I read your letter and looked at the pictures. My memories were awakened and my longing to visit you became stronger. If God gives us the grace to see each other again, I would come back to Heiden. As I read in your letter, you plan to visit me next time. I would be glad about that. If you would all come together, my joy would be greater.

The day I got your letter I felt so lucky and my mood became better. But it didn't last long. I got another letter from my home with bad news inside. My parents died. Mother died because of longing to see her two sons and because of not seeing us for such a long time. And Father died three days later because of her death and because of

missing us both too. You cannot change things that are painful but you also cannot hang your head and be depressed.

If you come to Essen to visit me I would be glad but only on Saturday and Sunday afternoons after 5 p.m.

Now I have to end this letter and I send lots of greetings to you, many greetings to Mrs. Meirecke, Annalise [Mrs. Schubert], Josef, Vincent [her brothers], and warm greetings to Mr. Kaspar [uncle who visited].

I always think of you,

Kosta

How thoughtful and warm my father was, in expressing his love and grief. There were people who cared for him in Heiden, who would risk ridicule and criticism to go see him in prison in another city during the war. He was not alone. Words from Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* come to me, and electrons of "grief, whose pain is love" move in my body.



Pilgrimage

Medjugorje, Yugoslavia. Amid mountains—*medju gorje*. A village where a certain miracle was said to have taken place.

My mother wanted to make the pilgrimage. It was September 1987, before the ravaging war that split up Yugoslavia. We had been traveling together all over her native land, and now we were here. I was amid mountains myself—my mountainous feelings.

Mother grew up on the island of Krk in the Adriatic Sea, but except for traveling to Zagreb for an operation as a child, she had never seen the rest of her country. She and I had often talked of making this trip together. After my father died, five years earlier, Mother began to travel more. Her life with him had been difficult; now she was going to enjoy herself.

We made a circle by bus through Yugoslavia, starting in Zagreb, stopping in Belgrade and then going through the magnificent river gorge in Serbia, ending up in medieval Dubrovnik. Mother and I were the only members of the group who spoke Serbo-Croatian, and we would often chat with the bus driver, Stipe (pronounced Sti-peh) during breaks on the road.

Stipe was the person who convinced me to take Mother to Medjugorje. He was tall, prematurely white-haired and handsome. “I know you told me you are not a believer,” he said gently in Serbo-Croatian. “But your mother really wants to go.” He was right, I thought. Why was I resisting going to Medjugorje? I could do something for my mother for a few days. “Are you sure you really want to go?” she asked, tilting her head.

We rented a car. The drive up the mountains along the Adriatic was difficult, it was hot, and the narrow road wound tortuously. A light fog drifted around us. With no guardrails, the road often brought us to dangerous precipices. From those heights the deep blue Adriatic and the sheer forest-covered terrain as we clung to the mountain were humbling. We were in the small republic of Hercegovina, about thirty kilometers southeast of Mostar, the nearest town.

“Even Musilmani [Muslims, in Croatian] come to Medjugorje,” said Mother as we drove. “And many have been converted since the Miracle first happened.” Muslims, Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Croatians, Serbians, Roma, Jews all lived in this part of Yugoslavia.

“I always regret asking your father to become Catholic. But he did it. That’s how much he wanted to marry me.”

My father converted from his Serbian Orthodox religion to Roman Catholicism to marry my mother, yet he hated religion and felt his conversion was a betrayal of his culture.

As the road leveled out to a plateau, Medjugorje loomed before us. Cars seemed to converge from all directions like ants returning to their hill home. A tall, twin-steepled beige church rose from behind a row of trees. More mountains rose well beyond the church, which dominated a sweep of rectangular farmlands and a clump of white stucco houses.

One road was totally blocked by traffic, so the police were detouring cars. I turned toward the other end of the village along with other pilgrims who were frantically trying to get in. The urgency I sensed from them clashed with the rickety horse-drawn cart lazily making its way along the road in the opposite direction.

As we passed a yellow field with a few cars trickling down its winding dirt path, my mother motioned wildly, as if we could beat the crowd. Was the miracle happening at that very moment? We'd better get there in a hurry or we'd miss it. Looking at her darkly, I said, "You can take the wheel if you want to." She looked away. I drove across the dry, bumpy field, hoping the little Fiat wouldn't fall apart before we got back to civilization.

Both my parents were Yugoslav immigrants; they met in New York after World War II. My father was a survivor of the Nazi camps, criminalized because he was a Slav. At age nine, my mother was separated from her parents for nine years; after the war she managed to get to the Bronx, where her family had settled.

"Don't you think this village looks a little like your home on the island of Krk—minus the occupiers, of course?" Sheep and goats were grazing; sparse trees shaded the stone houses and huddled around the church. The rocks, heat and dryness were reminiscent of her native Sveti Vid.

Mother had a one-track mind: "Let's just find a parking space and then we'll talk."

Through the trees, Medjugorje resembled an American country fair, but shabbier. Our rented Fiat squeezed into a space on the main dirt road. We saw crowds and cars everywhere, bushes weighed down by dust, grass flattened by pilgrims' shoes, men, women, children, young and old, dressed modestly in summer clothes, older women in dark kerchiefs and long dresses. Some people walked barefoot.

My cynicism escalated when I saw the vendors and hucksters. "They're only here to make a buck," I told Mother. Concession stands lined the path to the church. People bought food, religious objects, souvenirs. Cars were parked in disarray. A sheep wandered through this metal jungle.

In June of 1981 the Blessed Virgin Mary was said to have chosen six children, ranging in age from ten to sixteen years, to hear her message to suffering humanity in this village tucked away in a

Communist land. One hot day these children were walking aimlessly up the hill called Crnica (Tsrnitsa) above Medjugorje. When they stopped to rest against a rock, the dirt loosening beneath their worn shoes, one of them looked up and the sun began to swirl. Mother Mary's image formed in the air and spoke to them. They returned to the hill according to her instructions until she had finished all that she wanted to say. The children were to tell about their experience and urge people to save their souls. Each child was also entrusted with ten secrets. That's how the story goes.

Had the oldest girl perhaps brought drugs from Sarajevo? This could be the devil's work, said some. The children were examined by psychologists and priests. "Our lives are not easy," the villagers said. "Communism has tried to suppress our beloved religion. We buy necessities with the little money we have and fill out many forms just to receive our pensions." The villagers were proud that the Blessed Mother chose Medjugorje and readily believed the children.

More than half a million pilgrims streamed into the tiny village over the next four months. The little stone church could no longer hold them all. In the six years since the miracle, Mother Mary had reportedly appeared on occasion to the same six children, most of them adults by now, but the Catholic hierarchy in Rome refused to recognize the event as an "official" miracle. The children's lives and the village had changed, and others wanted to see Mother Mary, so they came with hope to Medjugorje.

I was tired and grumpy from the drive. How could my mother believe in this stuff? Mary appeared to some children? And the hordes of people—what were they after? A fix? A free cure? A message about what to do next? What were we doing here anyway?

In putting a damper on my mother's excitement, was I perhaps replicating the way she treated me as a child? She rarely supported my dreams, perhaps because of her own trapped feeling in her marriage and her past hurts. When I finished high school I wanted to go to Bermuda with my friends. "I'm saving up and we're planning the trip. It's so exciting!" But she dashed my hopes. "Oh, you're dreaming." She waved her hand at me. "It won't happen."

Mother said there was daily Mass at five o'clock. We could walk around a little, then go to Mass, then leave, was that okay? I said I would wait for her outside while she went to Mass.

As we approached the plaza in front of the church, several older women in kerchiefs circled on their knees in front of a statue of Mother Mary. They were praying aloud and crying fervently. More joined them. Some bent under the strain of crawling on their knees, but they did not stop, lost in their prayers. I told Mother I was going to the toilet. I stood in line. A group of men next to me were talking

and pointed to the sun as it hung lower in the sky. In Serbo-Croatian they spoke animatedly about how it was swirling, one asking another if he could see. I stared until it swirled for me.

I suddenly felt sad that I no longer believed. Where had my faith gone? I had wanted to be one of those special children to whom Someone Holy appeared. Yet how could I be intolerant of the beliefs of others? I felt lonely among these believers.

Mother wanted to walk down the path the children had taken behind the church. The hill beyond the church where Mary appeared to the children was a rocky, bushy, thorny little area, not easily reachable except by goats. As we passed a priest hearing confessions under a tree, a line of people waiting farther off, I mumbled, "It's been over ten years since my last confession."

"How do you know this really happened?" I asked my mother. "What are these secrets the children are supposed to keep and why?" Doggedly, she pointed to the spot where the children were said to have met the Mother of God—a rock on the Crnica hillside marked with a cross. Several pilgrims stood there, and more wound their way up. A car accident many years ago had left her right leg shorter, her foot swollen, her heel shattered. I wondered if Mother could handle the walk.

Cicadas sang monotonously. We passed cows and sheep grazing. Piled-up rocks formed low walls. A lazy peacefulness permeated the air. A woman's movements in the field interrupted the calm—she seemed to be wrenching something from the ground. How did she feel about strangers passing by? When we reached the hill, Mother said she couldn't go any farther, and I should go on. Maybe she felt the experience might renew my faith. Inside I was resisting the urge to shout, "No!"

I remembered my father's rages. One time he threw a statue of Mary that my mother kept on their bedroom bureau into the kitchen garbage, cursing Mother and her Catholic faith. Horrified, I rescued Mary from the damp, smelly bag. I stroked and cradled her and even kissed her tearfully, placing her back on the bureau where she belonged. I was religious then.

Mother asked me to Mass one more time. I held firm. It was all so hypocritical. Why even bother? I walked her to the church and then wandered down the powdery path, among the still canvas tents, something clutching at the inside of my chest.

The outdoor cafe where we had arranged to meet was closed. I sat at an empty table and waited, anxious to get on the road again and find a place to stay for the night. As I looked up the path, I felt glad to see the solitary figure approaching. I knew it was Mother by her limp. She must have left Mass right after communion, because of me, I

thought sadly. I stood up. She grew bigger as she limped closer.

Suddenly her limp seemed to hold all the tragedies of her life and mine. She and my father, the little our family had, choked me up. Irritated by her suffering, by her endless attempts to mold me, I was also grateful that we had come here together, that she let me have my feelings, that she was still alive. I thought of her blue eyes, so much like mine, and the gait she used to have that I preserve.

She thanked me for bringing her to Medjugorje and reached up to kiss me on the cheek. I let my tears flow for both of us.



My mother in traditional dress (last standing woman on right), with other villagers

After Church, Yugoslavia

They're very poor, my aunt said,
the Slovenian women.
Met each other in the concentration camp
during the war
& been together ever since.
Both sickly—one can't
breathe easily, the other
can't go to the bathroom.
If it wasn't for God
they'd kill themselves.
They found each other
at the camp & been
together ever since.
They say one was given
hormones by the Germans.
She wears pants now.
They live up the hill, she said,
they're very poor,
always together & care
for each other a lot
ever since the camp.

Mamica

I don't want my grandmother to be forgotten. When all who knew her leave this world, how will she be remembered? What if the time of her own life and one generation after is all there is? I am not a grandmother so what will become of me?

She was petite and had very pale, smooth skin. She had a nose kind of like mine, small but angular. She loved her religion and she loved dressing up and looking nice. At the end of her life, a sweetness came over her, a childlike goofiness. After her strokes affected her brain, she enjoyed the Teletubbies and watched them obsessively on TV. She'd say very little, but smiled and laughed. After one of her strokes, she lost her ability to speak or understand English, but she communicated fine in Croatian.

When she was living on her native island of Krk with her children, she had a goat that produced more milk than any other goat around. Her name was Bella. My grandmother had heard that if you talk to your animals they will produce more for you. Every morning she would fling open the kitchen window into the yard and say, "Good morning, Bella," and all kinds of endearments. Bella bellowed back happily.

As a young mother, she would get so angry at her children, my mother told me, that she'd yell at the top of her lungs and even hit them. It was overwhelming to have five children in the village of Sveti Vid in Croatia and a husband who worked in America. My mother and aunt told a story about her foaming at the mouth because of some vicious rumors the villagers were passing around. In 1938, he took his wife and three of the children back to New York. At the time, my grandparents had no idea that a war would break out and devastate Europe. My mother and uncle, still children, stayed on Krk with their grandmothers and were without their parents for nine years.

Mamica (pronounced mamitsa) was very religious and went to Mass even on weekdays. She had a shrine of the Blessed Mother in her room, Our Lady of Lourdes. It was about four feet tall, huge, or so it seemed to me as a child. There were rosary beads hung around the statue, and pictures of people Mamica wanted to remember—my sister Gina, who died at eighteen was there—and flowers and other little things. There were a couple of bottles of holy water from Lourdes.

She went to Lourdes once by herself. She felt like it was her mission, a duty to perform, something she had to do before she got too old. When I asked my mother about this recently, she couldn't remember if it was Fatima or Lourdes that Mamica went to.

"Mom, wasn't she in France?" I said.

“Yes, where is Fatima anyway? Is it in Portugal?”

“You know the story? She slept in a bathtub,” said my mother laughing.

“In a bathtub? Oh yeah, I remember something about that, but what actually happened? She couldn’t get a room?”

“I don’t know. I just know she slept in a bathtub because there was nowhere else.”

I couldn’t imagine why, but I knew it was at least part of her story, a kind of martyrish experience she liked to tell about. Only my grandmother would go all the way to the south of France to see Bernadette’s grotto and end up sleeping in a bathtub. She brought her holy water back from Lourdes, and I’m sure she lit candles and prayed there in addition to all the rituals.

I went to Lourdes this summer. It reminded me of Medjugorje, which I visited with my mother, but a more refined, established operation. After all, its miracle happened in 1858 in France, while the Medjugorje miracle happened in 1981 in Bosnia. Stores lined the streets to the Lourdes grotto, and a gigantic cathedral grew out of it. The grotto itself was a modest place.

My mother has always been religious, even after my sister died in an accident at a young age. My grandmother was even more religious. She seemed to love the accoutrements. I have great memories of my grandmother and how she giggled, made my favorite dishes, was such a well-organized person, saved little pieces of aluminum foil, and was very affectionate.

One day I was visiting my grandparents in my adult years. She and my grandfather were sitting in their respective chairs in their small apartment in St. Petersburg, Florida. A sweet flowery smell pervaded the place, especially around my grandmother. I called her Micica (mitsitsa) as a child, and Mamica when I got older. My grandfather was hard of hearing and looked a little lost in the conversation. We had just finished talking and were sitting there quietly when my grandmother got up and came toward me. Concerned, my grandfather half rose: “Mama, Mama, what’s the matter?” She walked over to me determinedly and gently squeezed my nose, giggling, “mića moya Sonjica.” My little tiny Sonja. Then about faced and walked frailly back to her chair. My grandfather looked befuddled, laughed and sat down. I loved that moment.

One time when I was five or so, my mother had to go get something from Micica at her job and took me with her. Micica worked in a sewing factory in Queens in a second story warehouse, among a huge sea of women with machines going so fast you couldn’t even see the needles whirring. The supervisor said something to my mother in the noise, pointing into the distance, in the middle of the

great complex of women working busily. My mother took me by the hand and led me down the corridors of seamstresses and piles of clothing. I was small; my head bobbed among the noisy machines.

When we got to my grandmother, she finished her stitch and burst into a smile as she lifted her head and saw me. I went to her and my heart swelled. This was my grandmother, and she was so special to me. She was in the limelight for me, a flower blooming in the middle of a plain lawn. I felt sad that she had to work in that mass of women. Looking back, I realize how absolutely central and pivotal she was to me, the only one who mattered in that vast ocean of seamstresses.

Mamica loved the Croatian Club in Astoria, where there were dances and music, and lots of Croatians yakking away in their familiar tongue. Sometimes my uncle Rudy Richman played the accordion with his band. The kids faded into the background (unlike today's kids) as the adults talked, drank, and danced. They were so tall from our perspective. My grandmother was not quite five feet tall, but she was big to us.

I could always pick out Mamica's nasal alto voice as she harmonized with the women at her table on the old Croatian songs. She would lean toward the others, as they sang without accompaniment, a capella ("in chapel style"), in a way that made my hard quiver.

Did she feel like she was back in Sveti Vid, where she lived when she married my grandfather? Or back in her childhood village, Oštobradić, only two villages away? It was drier and more isolated there, I felt when I visited. Maybe singing helped the women work and steer away from worthless small talk. I could see Mamica as a little girl, standing behind a clump of bushes, listening to the women singing as they finished their laundry and laid it out on the rocks.

Before she died, my grandmother sent me a photo inscribed with the words "To Sonja, St Petersburg, Florida, January 1991. Mamica with little Sonjica Franeta". She was forty-five at the time of the photo. It shows her holding me as a newborn, and pregnant with her last and sixth child, Mary, who was born four months after me.



Peasant Roots

Lipovka is a small Russian village of about a hundred wooden homes, four hours south of Moscow by train and not far from the ancient city of Ryazan, the oldest settlement in Russia. Burned twice in battles with neighboring states, the old Ryazan was sacked by Mongol invaders in 1237 and finally destroyed. It was part of Kievan Rus, the original unified country of eastern Slavic tribes, including Russians. A small settlement near the site of these great battles, Lipovka was not even on the map when I went there in 1993 and met some older villagers who remained after the younger people left to find a better life. They were descendants of this great history and of early Russia. Even today the villagers live simple lives based on subsistence farming and barter, reminiscent of those medieval times.

In the winter Lipovka is completely isolated. The makeshift temporary bridge across the flowing river is taken down when the river begins to ice over, and it is impossible to get there by car or truck. People have to conserve energy since they cannot get to town. They accumulate food for the winter months to feed themselves and their animals and to minimize their physical activity. One older woman told me she only left her bed in winter to eat and go to the bathroom.

In summer Lipovka blossoms and greens. Sheep and goats and cows go out to pasture every day, people work in the fields, and the sun bakes the long grass and forests. Insects make music. The air smells clean—dry grass and soil, a hint of sweet blossoms.

The summer of my visit I was there with Vera, one of several Muscovites who came to Lipovka as a break from the city's teeming crowds and urban stench. We were a couple then. I am Slavic too, Yugoslav, (meaning "south Slavic"). Sometimes I feel Yugoslavia's centuries-long ethnic war inside me. Vera once made such an observation when I had an emotional outburst: "You have Serbia and Croatia warring inside you." I was shocked when she said that, and I asked her never to say it again. It was too true.

The dynamics of the Balkans and the war in Yugoslavia scared and pained me. Yugoslav politicians, especially President Slobodan Milosevic, were spreading ethnic animosities through the media that year, a time of economic decline and political shifts. The phenomenon of extreme cruelty, the rapes and violence against women during the Yugoslav war, the "ethnic cleansing" and pitting of Muslims against Christians, the resemblance to Nazism in this small European country—all that was dominating world news.

Yet I was pulled to Russia to travel and work, not to Yugoslavia.

My mother, a devout Catholic, once said I must have been Russian in another life. Maybe Yugoslavia was just too close to home. My parents had fought about everything from politics and culture to their languages and religions and historical hurts during World War II. Those arguments echoed in my heart.

I was the only child out of us four siblings who took an interest in my parents' culture. I not only continued to speak Serbo-Croatian but went on to study Russian and Russian literature in college. No one knew or cared about Yugoslavia in my youth, except those specializing in it at the university. It was the civil war in the 1990s that rallied the world's attention. In a small Russian bygone village, far from war, close to the earth and my feelings, I met a woman who reminded me of my father's family in Serbia.

Auntie Nyura, as Vera called her, burst into our small one-room bungalow, her two metal front teeth shining in a bright red face. "I had to come by tonight! I missed you two today!" she exclaimed.

She rushed over to me as I sat on the bed reading, took my face in her strong hands, and kissed me soundly on the cheek. Vera beamed in the background, then left us alone. Nyura smelled like earth, milk, her cow—she hadn't washed for days. I was smiling by the time she sat down beside me on the bed, like we were old friends and had a lot to talk about. She was in her mid-sixties yet spry and energetic. After a brief exchange, she jumped up impulsively and sat in the chair across from me with her hands firmly on her lap, watching me from a distance.

I asked her if she had heard what happened today. She stared at me, her eyes peering and her mouth pursed, a light blue kerchief tied crookedly around her head. I never saw her without a kerchief. I felt my eyebrows go up with the excitement of what I was trying to convey. I knew the value these village people placed on good potatoes, mushrooms, and rich dark bread. I had big news!

"What?" She moved forward.

"Vera found so many mushrooms this morning."

"How many?" Nyura looked like a kid, as she squared her shoulders in a challenge.

"About fifty, maybe more," I bragged.

"I beat her. I got even more." she thrust her chin forward.

"So you went out today too?" I asked amicably.

"Yes, I did. You know I can't see very well but I can smell them. And I found a lot. I also mowed and weeded in the field. And I'm tired!" She turned her earth-lined hands over on her lap and glanced out the window. "But I have to go now, my cow is wandering down the road. I'll see you tomorrow." She was off.

A highlight of my friendship with Nyura was seeing her needlepoint artistry, which I did one day when she invited us to the house she shared with her husband, a gray, disheveled, bearded man, hunched and silent, almost a nonentity in her regard, it seemed. It was a small thatched hut with animals in the yard. She led us into her sitting room/dining area and offered tea and sweet bread and dried fish. Proudly she showed me all the dried fish she had hanging in her shed, and Vera explained that she used the fish to barter for other food and supplies for the winter months. That was what the villagers did. It was their way of life.

Nyura told me that as a child she wanted to be an artist but it was impossible to do that, in the small kolkhoz (collective farm) village of Lipovka. The kolkhoz had been the basis of Soviet agriculture. I wondered if things had changed since perestroika and the demise of the Soviet Union.

“When I was small they took me to a school across the bridge. I drew something. The teacher said, ‘What a beautiful horse.’ I could see a horse, and there on the paper was a very realistic looking horse.”

“Then what happened?”

“It was only for a few years that I went to the school, and not very much. Mostly I stayed in Lipovka.” She shrugged. Farming here was her destiny, and she worked at it very hard.

We sat there in her main room, surrounded by her embroidery work. It was dazzling. Smiling broadly, cheeks rising and teeth protruding, she watched me as I perused the room in awe. Her pieces hung on every available space—it looked the Hermitage when I first saw it in the early 1990s, paintings draping the walls every which way. With so many great works, it was hard to focus on one in particular. Colorful flowers in fine stitching bloomed among houses, fields, and animals in broader stitching. The overall effect was of elaborate lightness and adornment. The pieces were a patchwork, many hanging off-kilter, but I felt their hominess and brightness. When I oohed and ahed, she nodded: “I did all that.”

After all my admiration of her artwork, Nyura was more interested in having me try her dried fish which had a stronger smell than anchovies. She dismissed talk of her art, survival was her focus.



I was nineteen, in 1971 and freshly married to Tom, an NYU physics professor, when he and I traveled for the first time to the land of my father. I wanted to meet the Franeta side of my family. People often say that the name Franeta sounds Italian. Some mystery surrounds the origin of the name. Relatives say it was changed or obscured for political or ethnic reasons. Was there Albanian or Turkish or some other heritage in our background? All we knew was my father's family, originally from Budva, a beautiful Adriatic city close to the border of Albania, moved at some point to Aleksinac (pronounced Aleksinats), a village in Serbia south of the capital city, Belgrade. My grandfather wanted to farm, and the rocky dryness of Budva was not a place for that. My grandparents had ten children, only five of whom survived to adulthood.

One of them was my Aunt Angie. I was very drawn to her even before I meeting her on that 1971 trip to Aleksinac, where she and my father and two other surviving siblings grew up. My father once told a story about teenage Angie climbing up a tree to escape her wedding night. He laughed, but the story made me curious about my rebellious aunt. I often studied the photo my father had of his family: eight people and a baby lined up in two rows, the younger ones standing at attention, with my grandparents and the married brother Vukale (pronounced Vukaleh) and his wife and child seated, unsmiling. Aunt Angie has short hair, framing a beautiful face, her hand draped over her brother Vukale seated in front of her. She is slender in a light dress, her eyes piercing under dark eyebrows.

When Tom and I arrived in Aleksinac, it was hot. We drove down a dusty dirt road and asked some people where the Franetas lived.

They pointed up another road and asked if we were Americans. I said yes, wondering how they had heard about us so quickly. We drove on with giggling children running after us, shouting and pointing: "There! There!" Some people were walking down the road toward us. We parked and got out of the car.

I stood in the middle of the road when a tall, commanding woman in a white kerchief, her face reddish and teeth protruding slightly, approached with the group. She seemed different from the photograph. Her loose dress swayed as her bare feet strode firmly on the pebbly dirt.

"Sonja" she said longingly, her eyes watering, "I'm your Teta Ange." And with all her tallness and broadness she hugged me. I thought I might pass out. I was weak and sweaty from the heat but overwhelmed by her intense affection, her rustic authenticity, her physical strength, her jubilation at meeting me. I was her American niece—a distance that seemed difficult to cross, but it was bridged when our eyes met and she hugged me.

The next day my Aunt Angie insisted that I come to her house up the road and have some fresh, warm cow's milk. It seemed a bit heavy for my stomach, but everyone said it would be good for me. Angie's daughter-in-law, with her smiling face and suntanned, rugged beauty, rubbed my shoulders as I started to feel sick, perhaps from the new bacteria in the milk. They hovered around me, soothing me and taking care of me in low voices.

I visited my other relatives too. My uncles were so similar to my father with the same thick, curly hair and mustaches and dark and intense eyes under heavy eyebrows. But they seemed older, much older. Uncle Vukale's son, my cousin Lyubo (which means "love") took charge of us. He and his wife Lela and their two children lived right next door to Vukale and his daughter; Uncle Mark and his wife lived next door to them. They all walked freely in and out of each other's houses, never knocking. Doors were left open, and sometimes only curtains hung in doorways. There was no privacy.

"You'll be staying with us," Lyubo announced.

I hesitantly informed him that we had booked a motel room. He and Lela were offended: "How could you do that, we are your family!"

I explained that my husband was not used to the Yugoslav culture and needed to stay at a motel. They reluctantly acquiesced.

Lyubo took me by the hand: "Well, you can at least rest here for a while."

He opened the door to a small room they had prepared for us. A big puffy bed with crisp white sheets awaited us. The shades were drawn and it was dark inside. The smell of fresh linens and the coolness was such a relief. Lela stood behind her husband, smiling

proudly. "You can rest, we'll be very quiet." We thanked them. When we woke up and opened the door, they were all still sitting there talking quietly, waiting for us to finish our naps.

It was difficult to accept the innocent intensity of their love and affection. That kind of hospitality was familiar to me from my own family life, but when my parents adapted to U.S. culture, they had to lose this affection and community in favor of something more formal. My parents tried hard to become Americanized, and they became something in between. I never saw my father kiss or hug my brother the way Lyubo did his son.

That evening Lyubo rounded us up to go into town. Before we left, he showed off his pig. Then he swept his hand around, indicating the land that used to belong to our grandfather Luke "before the Communists came," before they were forced to collectivize.

"He was a very prominent farmer here and very well respected. And they took all this away from us." He was bitter at the loss of ownership, as others were.

We went to the cafe in town; he wanted us to take him in our car, to show off that his relatives were visiting him. We sat at a central table in the open-air cafe, shaded by big trees. He ordered slivovitz, a very strong plum brandy popular in Yugoslavia. I told him I drank very little and my husband didn't at all. He insisted that we celebrate.

"What kind of a man are you?" he said to Tom in Serbian. I was glad they couldn't understand each other. We ordered some mineral water. Lyubo proceeded to get very drunk. My father had told me that my grandfather also had a severe drinking problem.

Before I left, Lyubo and Lela generously presented me with a set of books by the famous Montenegrin poet and statesman Nyegosh; he was a lone writer in a mostly illiterate milieu. His poetry reflects the warring history of the region. I still have the books.

In April of 1999, during the recent war that split Yugoslavia, President Clinton sent U.S. troops to join NATO forces in Yugoslavia. The first bombing he ordered mistakenly hit the small town of Aleksinac, where my relatives lived, killing several people and causing much destruction. Uncle Mark's wife was traumatized by the noise and the cracks in her walls, and she died of a heart attack shortly after the bombing.

These are my roots yet only fragments remain. The old way of life will never be the same. As with Aleksinac, the survival of the small Russian village of Lipovka is questionable. When the older people die, so too will the village. My family in Aleksinac has died too. Only a few cousins remain. Others have scattered across the globe. The connection between Auntie Nyura and Auntie Angie is my own, but there are larger similarities in the peasant life, in the strength of the

women despite their place in society, even in history. Lipovac is a neighborhood of Aleksinac; its name is derived from the word for linden tree in Serbo-Croatian, as Lipovka is in Russian.



My Violin Loves to Play



My father, me and Lassie

I've been in bed all day. This is very unusual for me. I'm in a lot of pain. I have no idea where it comes from. And now my father's face begins to flash before me. It's been ten months since he died. Various events in my life have kept me from thinking much about what his death means to me. Now I'm suddenly caught in this excruciating neck pain. A cramped muscle pulls my left shoulder to my neck so tautly that when I try to turn my head the pain screams in my ear. I get nervous when the image won't go away.

His mustache is trimmed the way it was when I was two. I listen for his whistle when he comes home from work and picks me up, kisses me hard, holds real tight. His mustache is bristly, yes, but I love it, his pride in, his love of me for loving it.

He was a big man, tall and strong and solid. He seemed to become more hostile the older I got. The beating when I was sixteen was not the first time he laid a hand on me, but it was by far the worst.

I push and tread in my dark bed.

I'm glad he died. We're rid of him. But now, as my neck and shoulder throb, my father's face won't leave me alone. In my pain and stiffness I feel unexpectedly drawn to him, his smooth olive

complexion, his lovely cheekbones high, a burst of capillaries between bone and skin. I want to touch his face. His eyes look into the distance, at his own suffering during World War II perhaps, but not at me.

My father was violent. The day I went to my first prom with Tony, my first real romance, I was sixteen and thrilled. When Tony came to pick me up, my father was decidedly cold and abrupt. He'd told me earlier that I was not to come home after midnight. My mother plotted with me about how she'd cover for me, reminding me to be very quiet when I came home. I left my anxieties behind as I stepped out into my new evening gown on the arm of the handsome and attentive Tony.

It was late when Tony dropped me off. We made out in the car before I crept into the house. Every sound seemed to echo. After a while I heard my parents' arguing voices. My heart was pounding, and I expected an explosion. As I was putting on my nightgown, my bedroom door swung open and my father stepped inside, cursing me in Serbian and swinging his belt.

He began to beat me. There was a terrifying passion in those blows; he looked lost. I remember screaming and falling to the floor, trying to ward off the blows with my arms. My only weapon was words: "Go ahead and kill me." My mother whimpered in the background begging him to stop. Why did she stay with him? Why didn't protect she us from his chronic raging?

I was afraid he was going to kill me. Suddenly my cousin, who was almost his size and was living with us at the time, came in and yanked him off me. He kept calling me a whore and a bitch as she dragged him out of the room.

The next day I lay in bed swollen, wanting comfort from Tony or a friend, anyone not in my family. My mother came to me tearfully, asked me not to tell anyone, to keep the beating, his brutality, a secret. My shame was so great I wouldn't have said anything anyway.

I wanted to die. My body turned wooden then—stiff, asleep, scarred. I had to forget. But what do I do now, these many years later? My neck is killing me.

I call my friend Susie. She tells me how to treat my neck, asks if I can rest with the image of my father—accept it, not fight it—and understand the pain as truth, and she would be over soon. I have no idea what she's talking about, but I she is an important friend and teacher at this juncture of my life. She says the pain could be a memory from the beating or from an actual injury, but either way my body can no longer store it away.

In a few days my neck pain does get better. I feel my body has communicated something to me. I run my hands along my left

shoulder, grabbing my neck where it had hurt so badly, then I slide my hands down the rest of my body.

I love the violin, an amazing possibility of sound contained in a stiff yet womanly instrument. Wooden, I begin to speak of the anger and pain. Waxing my bow, I begin to see that my father will never leave my psyche.

About ten days after the pain stopped, Susie and Jean, her lover, took me out to lunch to celebrate my birthday. My father was still on my mind. Jean also had problems with her father. Susie helped the conversation along because she knew both of our stories. I learned that Yugoslav fathers and Cuban fathers had things in common, and that Jean had fought hard against her father's possessiveness as well.

But there was a charm about these men. Susie liked Jean's father and got along with him. I had always felt my father was sweeter to my friends, and embarrassingly flirtatious, although he was so hard and distant with me, perhaps afraid of himself around me. I was glad for the interaction with Jean, and felt a closeness and a connection.

When we got home, I had to get ready for work—second shift at the aircraft factory near the airport. I really didn't feel like going. Susie called me into the other room and said, "You don't have to accept, but Jean and I would like to give you a special gift. We'd like to make love to you for your birthday.

My eyes widened. Looking away, I said, "What about work?"

She laughed. "Call in sick." I shook my head seriously, my heart pounding within me like it was another person. "Think about it," she said.

How could I turn down this offer from a dear trusted friend and her attractive lover? It was too good to be true, and I hadn't had sex in a while. I went upstairs, got into my work pants and flannel shirt. Then I dialed work.

We laughed awkwardly at first, my waterbed rocking us around. Susie's laugh is full and free, her eyes glisten. Jean is strong and dynamic. She knows women well and seems much better at giving her lovemaking than receiving. I know Susie loves sex with Jean, and I enjoy experiencing their intimacy, as well as their pleasure with me. They undress me, kiss me gently. I begin to relax into their gift.

I feel an excitement and looseness in my body that I have never felt before, as if I were swiftly coming alive after a long sleep. A fluidity grows with their focus on my body, both women caressing me, my vagina opening wider than I've ever felt, unabashedly wanting more than I've ever wanted. The tips of my breasts seem to be drawing out some very deep sound in me.

I love the complexity of our attentions. Their making love to me turns into Jean and Susie loving each other. I touch both of them with

tender affection. I want time to stop. But when Jean turns to me alone with her virtuoso energy and prowess, Susie leaves the room, jealous at being excluded. I don't want to face this conflict just now—the pitch between Jean and me is high—so the two of us go on alone.

We wrangle. She can be rough and gentle at the same time, utterly patient with my rhythm, pulling my hair, wanting to reach my mouth. I feel like thanking her at one point, but I just surrender to her capable hands and enjoy.

We take a rest and woo Susie back to bed—she loves us and even loves the chance to cry. I watch the intimacy between them as Jean coaxes Susie's frustrations out, tears and all. I feel I shouldn't be there, that there is something very private going on.

They begin to make love. I ask if I should leave. Of course not. I hold Susie as Jean makes love to her. Slowly, cajoling with words, Jean makes Susie come. I am witness to a powerful and sacred moment. My dear friend is glad I am there, I feel her softness and warmth. Now I cry, too, moved by the emotions and intensity of all that is happening. We are close and open with each other. My small chamber is about to burst.

For days after this symphonic night, my body trembles with a hum at my very center. A tuning fork I never knew about, its tines vibrate and send out the sounds of my surviving spirit throughout my body, newly aware. I'm so loose it seems I could easily fall apart. I remember reaching, stretching, holding, pulling, forgetting all responsibilities and obligations, hurts and memories, as I listen to some preverbal, prehistoric sound inside. I let the hands of my friends reach my deepest nook and their arms hold me so tightly I cry.

I feel the wood of my body ease into music. Can I survive like this? In this body that I set aside with the beating, this body that has held on to all the complex emotions about my father, wanting to win him and yet hating him for such cruelty?

Straining my senses, I release some of the pain, the tightness that seized me that night and took the place of young romance. Loved with such abandon by Susie and Jean, I have lost the need to touch my father's face. My violin has its own music.

Part 2: Activist



“What is writing but translating.”

Marina Tsvetaeva

Emerging Voices

She didn't speak. I watched her—serious, diligent. I was the substitute teacher. She was from Vietnam. She seemed to understand what people said. She did her assignments. She seemed to have friends.

I wondered how she got by in her seventh grade class, whether she spoke at home with her family; maybe she spoke in her language. Had she been traumatized? The regular teacher didn't explain; she just warned me the girl didn't speak and told me not to worry.

I saw something of myself in that silent student. Her lack of speech recalled my own difficulties in school. I had grown up in a working-class immigrant household myself, and now I search for ways to help myself and other teachers understand our students and their needs better.

Immigrants and their children continuously experience the quandary of being in two cultures (or maybe more). Their culture's values may conflict with those of the U.S. For example, U.S. elderly are often institutionalized, whereas in most cultures this would be considered inhumane and immoral. There are many such conflicting values—how children are raised, regard for authority, the political process, and so on.

To be homesick for the old country and not fully embrace the U.S. can be very isolating. I remember how my parents and relatives longed for a Yugoslavia that no longer existed after World War II. My parents held onto their old ways—a Slavic peasant culture—while living in New York City. Mythicizing the old country hindered their assimilation. They did not have much support in their acculturation, and like many immigrants, they made a lot of mistakes before achieving their few successes. I am sure they felt awkward and uncomfortable in ways I could not understand as a child.

I remember when my father's nephew came to the U.S. and stayed with us. He was in his mid-twenties, a bubbly, effusive young man. He smiled a lot and seemed thrilled to be with us and in the U.S. One day we stood on the sidewalk in front of our house in the Bronx. He put his arm around my teenage brother casually, then took my brother's earlobe between two fingers and rubbed it affectionately, as he would do with all of us, and as he probably did in moments of affection in his culture. I remember my father saying, in Serbo-Croatian, "Men don't do that here." He was training his nephew in American ways—do not be affectionate, especially with a man; you're a man and you shouldn't do that here. I can only begin to imagine what experiences my father must have had that led him to make such

a strong statement.

Those of us who teach English to people new to U.S. society teach our students much more than the language. We are role models who bring our own experiences, culture, lifestyles, philosophies, and politics to our students. Among all the struggles immigrant students encounter adjusting to the U.S. or another country, speaking the language correctly is minor. They have a myriad of pressures on them—jobs, children, making ends meet. Many of them used to be professionals in their countries and are now working-class, or living in exile. Do we demand too much of them? Do we give them the opportunity to explore the clash of old and new cultures, find their place in a new society, and learn important survival skills? Can we help them learn to be circumspect or to get support with personal problems? Is this part of our job?

The key to success in college, I learned, was knowing how to express myself with a certain polish, both orally and in writing. But I only learned this after going through the mill of painful experiences. Empowerment, confidence, and class are important factors in achieving command of a language. As I went through school and tried to advance, I became more and more intimidated by the act of speaking. Educated in Roman Catholic schools, I was never really taught critical thinking skills and was not encouraged to work with relevant material.

I began writing on my own to offset feeling marginalized as a working-class student from an immigrant family and as then a woman who didn't want a traditional marriage. When I did marry, I keenly felt a class difference with my husband and with people in academia as well. I learned to advocate for my people rather than submit to the stereotypes. I learned to be fearless with language once I accepted myself as I was. Then I could be responsible for my own life. Because of my own experiences I am now mindful of my students' dilemmas and I want to find ways to help them achieve self-acceptance through language.

I was a quiet, self-conscious child, worried about displeasing the teacher and about the other kids laughing at me. I remember Miss Strazza, my first-grade teacher, how patient and attentive she was with me, even with fifty-plus students in the class! Perhaps she felt sorry for me. I don't remember the kids laughing at me specifically, but I remember her defense of me and my struggle with English. Toward the end of the school year I came down with the German measles. My biggest regret was losing Miss Strazza as my teacher.

Although I was born in New York, when I started first grade I only knew Serbo-Croatian. English was my second language. My siblings and I were different from the rest of the kids in our

predominantly Irish and Jewish neighborhood. No other student in my St. Nicholas of Tolentine grammar school class spoke another language besides English. This felt lonely. Many of the people we met did not even know where Yugoslavia was, yet it was the center of our life as a family.

Perhaps the children at school noticed my accent or thought there was something funny about my grammar. I remember that my younger cousin always spoke with a slight Yugoslav accent, the *o*'s shorter, the *th* more like a *d*. Perhaps I too sounded like this and left articles out and put in an *a* here and there for rhythm: "The pencil is a pointy." Maybe I spoke slowly. I don't know. I was just different.

"How can you teach them that low-life island Bodulski!" a translation of what my father said when he was angry with my mother. *Bodulski* is a dialect of Croatian spoken on the Dalmatian Islands. Born in Montenegro, my father identified as a Serb and wanted us children to learn proper Serbian, the "superior" language. Politics ranked high on the list of what my parents fought about. My own views about the content of these arguments included approving of Tito's leadership as a Partisan during World War II and admiring how the Communists were able to bring the warring Balkan ethnic groups together.

I felt the power of language—it was palpable during these arguments. Words hurt. When I grew more curious about the specifics of my parents' fury, I'd gently ask my mother the meaning of some word I heard uttered with such vehemence. "Where did you hear that?" she would lash out. "I don't ever want to hear you say that again!" or if she happened to be in a sadder mood, "You don't want to know what that means. It's a bad word." How words would stay with me for days, reverberate, make me cry and wonder! How strongly they affected my parents!

My mother speaks with an accent still, and my father had a thicker one. His was almost Germanic. He had learned German while in a Nazi prison camp for three years during World War II. Not very literate in English, my father was an embarrassment to me. He was smart, but there were many things he'd rather do than read. He built a pigeon coop for his beloved birds and planted roses, hydrangeas, tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers in our Bronx garden.

My mother, the intellectual one, loved to read and listen to opera. Much of my attraction to culture and language comes from her sharing these interests with me. What drew her to European culture and music as a girl, growing up in a rocky little village where she had to tend goats during her free time? She learned Italian when the Italian Fascists occupied her Croatian village for most of the war. She was eighteen when she escaped turbulent Yugoslavia to come to the

U.S.

When all was quiet and the village church empty, as a teenager, Mom would walk up to the great church organ and play “Va, Pensiero,” the inspirational choral aria from Verdi’s opera *Nabuco*, in which the Hebrews sing about their captivity. It mirrored Mom’s captivity under the Fascists, and then the Nazis. In Italian she’d sing, “Oh, my country so lovely and lost! / Oh remembrance so dear and so fraught with despair! / Golden harp of the prophetic seers, / why dost thou hang mute upon the willow?”

So whose language was I learning? It was all very confusing. My parents spoke various languages as a result of where they were born and who subjugated their country. I learned to speak the language of the U.S., but it didn’t feel like it was my language. No one else in school spoke my parents’ language. Now I see why immigrants stayed in the cocoon of their own national communities rather than venture out into English. These were a communities that knew and acted out their history and culture, preserved it through dances and other cultural gatherings, and talked about the politics that was specific to a time and place. The feeling of belonging was life.

While I felt marginal because of my parents’ culture, school became an odd kind of refuge for me. No one cared to know anything about Yugoslavia, yet I felt drawn to my adopted English language and literature. I was learning to be an American. At the same time, there was some mythical ideal that I didn’t really understand but was supposed to live up to, the message I was getting from my parents—how to be a good wife, following old traditions. In this new culture, where I was growing up, I was in love with learning.

Miss Mary Lynch, a new lay teacher in the small Catholic high school I attended, acquainted us with the Western “greats.” I read novels and poetry voraciously—George Eliot, Sinclair Lewis, Walt Whitman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edith Wharton. I loved Miss Lynch’s enthusiasm and the way she treated us as adults, capable of grasping the vastness of literature.

Later in life I realized I hadn’t identified much with the stories and novels I read in high school. Because of class, I had much more in common with books like Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, the story of Caribbean immigrants in New York. As bell hooks explains so well in *Teaching to Transgress*, “Class is rarely talked about in the United States; nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class differences than in educational settings.”

Miss Lynch also taught us speech, with the air of a queen. She wanted to help us lose those Bronx accents. The word “sound” became round, drawn out, and deeper than the nasal, back-of-the-throat, New Yorkese equivalent. It was a beautiful peach, she helped us imagine. I

was becoming more sensitive to the beauty of English! I learned what the uvula was, that small punching-bag piece of flesh hanging down from the roof of the mouth above the back of the tongue.

I made the school play in the last two years of high school, using my English onstage. My English vocabulary grew, but my Serbo-Croatian remained the same. I began to write poetry. Sometimes I loved just sitting in my room alone, reading poetry aloud. It was exciting to pronounce these words, which seemed so clean and simple and uplifting next to Serbo-Croatian.

I mulled over stories I wanted to write. Offstage, it still felt intimidating to speak much. I felt shame about my family's difference. I also felt besieged by my parents' arguments and the escalating violence at home. I began to express my innermost feelings and dreams on paper. Writing down my pain and confusion soothed me, but I kept these writings to myself. In fiction, I would write an old woman's thoughts as she walked slowly down the street or a girl's as she floated in the ocean. My first poem was about the rosary. I wrote about God or how I wanted to help people and build a better future. Writing helped pacify my worries.

My family noticed my interests and my introspection. Dad took me downstairs one day and surprised me. He had been refinishing the basement. A pair of doors separated the furnace from the rec room. He opened the doors. It was toasty inside, the stone walls gray, unlike the clean, pale, wood-paneled basement. My eyes darted to the right side next to the furnace. Something new—a desk, a small typewriter, two empty bookshelves above the desk, and a dark blue painting of a restless, stormy sea. I was curious. Dad smiled: "You can 'stedy' here." I could hardly believe it! It was a dream come true! I hugged him as tears came to my eyes.

At the time, I worked as a checker in a supermarket after school, but when I came home I went right to that "room of my own." There I nurtured myself. Writing kept me alive and helped me grow. I wrote through tears and anger. I wrote poetry in vague, gushy rhythms, and it was all my own. Even my best friend didn't know how serious I was about writing. With the furnace switching on and off regularly and the sea swirling in the painting and pen and paper before me, I created my own safe world.

Another dilemma nudged at me during high school days. As I became sexually aware of myself, I found I was drawn to other girls. I knew this was wrong. I had heard others make fun of "lezzies." Of course I wasn't one, but I felt so drawn and attached to my best friend. Here was yet another thing about myself I feared saying, another difference.

I had another high school girlfriend, who later came out as a

lesbian, as I did. Our relationship was the closest I had ever come to admitting this dreadful feeling:

Lost moments...
We lay side by side in separate beds.
She asks do I want something?
I lie longing for her arms to go around me,
To settle my head on her breasts,
Hear her soft voice and familiar laugh closer
Than I've ever heard.

And I turn,
I turn away in my bed
Pushing those dark desires into night,
Treading to keep above water despite the dark.
I can't, just can't
There's too much to overcome
We would be lonely and ridiculed.

Another moment missed.
She calls me years later.
She's "out," I'm married.
She found a poem of love I'd written.

She asks to see me.
I say no, trembling,
Blotting out the love,
desire, stretching toward me.
I wanted her.
I stayed straight.

In college I found teachers who encouraged me to write. I became more open about sharing my work when my freshman English teacher asked to see students' creative writing. He was tactful and encouraging.

"Why don't you read William Carlos Williams," he suggested, "or Richard Eberhart? I think you'd like their styles." He urged me to use form and meter to take control of my words. I learned a little about craft and how to study other poets. Miss Greenberg, my French teacher, was also intrigued with the prose poem I wrote in French for an assignment.

I found fellow students who were captivated by writing. I was still reading aloud to myself in the basement, but felt I shy about opening my mouth in class. The condescending attitudes of some professors

didn't help; they had the power to get the entire class to laugh at something a student said. I knew that I spoke slowly and not in a refined way. One instructor suggested speech lessons.

Later in life, reading Ursula Le Guin's speech to women students at Bryn Mawr about the learning experience, I smiled at her wise words: "You came here to college to learn the language of power—to be empowered. If you want to succeed in business, government, law, engineering, science, education, the media, if you want to succeed, you have to be fluent in the language in which 'success' is a meaningful word."

When I moved away from my family to marry a physics professor, my marriage allowed me the leisure to continue my education. I didn't have to work. The opportunity to study another Slavic language beckoned. Russian literature seemed so much closer to me than English and American literature—Gogol's "Overcoat," Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. And the poetry, ah yes, I wanted to learn Russian well enough to understand the poetry. Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Alexander Pushkin opened up an entire world of feelings and rhythms, irony and passion. With encouragement from the department chair, I went on for my master's degree in Russian literature at New York University. I began to appreciate the translation process. I translated poems by Anna Akhmatova.

A forbidden line lies in human intimacy,
Neither being in love not passion can cross it—
Though lips are merged in eerie silence
And the heart is bursting from love.

Friendship is powerless at this point
And years of sublime and fiery happiness,
When the soul is free and a stranger
To the slow languor of lust.

Ones who struggle toward it are mad,
Those who reach it, stricken with anguish...
Now you understand why my heart
Does not beat beneath your hand...

While writing and literature were my constant companions, speech was still troublesome for me. I had difficulty completing sentences when I spoke. Putting words together and saying them seemed an enormous task. I felt like a stutterer, though I wasn't. Even in conversation with my husband and friends, this inability to

articulate haunted me. I didn't think I belonged with the academics and scientists I was meeting. My husband came from a prosperous family, and I wondered if my class origins embarrassed him. Yet I was comfortable with writing.

I wanted to go on for my Ph.D. at U.C. Berkeley. While I was taking classes to prepare for a "Permission to Proceed" exam, the university's drive to mold graduate students to think a certain way became more apparent to me. I was having problems connecting with the literature and the interpretations they wanted. I didn't voice, couldn't voice, these opinions readily. I began to feel cramped and restricted. How could I be a writer and in academia? It seemed contradictory. One had to conform to the demands of one's field.

I did well on the written exam and I was about to take the oral exam. I entered a room of men in suits joking and slapping each other on the back. They asked me questions. I was too brief, too quiet, I had too little to say. I felt odd, out of place, somehow hypocritical, and writhed in my discomfort. I didn't like the questions, and I knew the old boys club was not happy with my answers. I froze again and again, trying to articulate my thoughts. The room seemed small; the men surrounded me. Were they ridiculing my inability to express myself? I wanted to leave. They smiled; I could try again.

A new adviser was assigned to me for my next attempt. He was young and loved poetry. He even turned me on to a couple of books by lesbian poet Eleanor Lerman, who became important to me as I explored my sexuality. Strange—did he sense I was a lesbian then? When we met shortly before the next P.P. exam, he questioned me casually about what my father did for a living. I said he was a maintenance man, then a locksmith, and that we were very poor as I grew up. He puffed on his pipe. Why was he interested in these details about my class origins right before my exam?

The day arrived. I was more nervous the second time. The new committee consisted of two women and two men, in an attempt at equity, but they were all "men in suits." They pointed to the armchair. I felt like Lily Tomlin's Edith Ann in a chair three times my size. Words wouldn't come. My adviser shook his head regretfully. The chair awarded me a master's degree in comparative literature as a consolation prize. My academic career crashed.

I fell into a deep depression. I was not smart enough, not good enough for Berkeley. I hadn't learned the survival skill of giving the professors what they wanted. What did they know of what teemed inside of me? What did they know of my desk in the furnace room and the stormy ocean painting? What did they know of my struggles with language or my desire to make the world a better, more just place? I found a way forward, a way out of my discomfort with speech, by

coming to terms with myself.

“I think that wild love between women is so totally inconceivable that to talk or write that in all its dimensions, one almost has to rethink the world, to understand what it is and what happens to us,” wrote feminist Nicole Brossard in *The Aerial Letter*.

My life was changing rapidly. It was 1976, the women’s movement was at its peak, and my buried sexual feelings for women were coming out in my dreams and my writing. Something was not quite right. I was a professor’s wife, but what about my own life? I hadn’t had children for reasons of my own. The pill made it possible to wait, and I wasn’t sure about my marriage. I had never wanted to get married, only to get away from home. I was translating a book for a Russian professor I knew in New York, but I had no idea what I wanted to do after that. I was taken care of by my husband, so I didn’t have to rush into anything.

I was terribly unsettled in my settled life.

I worked silently—a quilt frame took up most of the room, my books lined one whole wall and my desk faced the window. To relieve the stress of studying, I had taken up quilting. It was soothing. I could think. The small flowered border I freehanded came out well. The woman next door played the Elton John song “Daniel” on the piano. Was that the only song she knew? Did it have some meaning for her? I’d never even met her—there was no sense of community in this suburban Stanford University neighborhood in the hills.

What was I doing there? The daughter of immigrants who lived in a Bronx basement apartment, my father working two jobs and my mother keeping us children fed and clean and attending to the apartment building. I had abandoned my origins. I had skipped over middle class, which my parents worked so hard to become, and gone straight to upper middle class. My husband’s father was an airline executive with a house in Atlanta and two vacation homes.

As I quilted, I thought how meaningless this all was—the isolation, the money, and the status. I was about to come to the biggest turning point in my life. I was twenty-five. I would soon be leaving all of it—the comfort, the quiet, the money, the woman playing “Daniel.” When I had doubts, Auden would help me: “Get up and fold your map of desolation / Act from thought should quickly follow / Or what is thinking for.”

In the sixth year of my marriage, I traveled to the Soviet Union with a group of people who I later learned were socialists. They taught me much about global politics, society, and life. I met my first lesbian lover in that group. She was from San Francisco, and we talked about my “failure” at Berkeley, my life as a wife, the future of capitalism,

and many other things. I decided to leave my socially acceptable life for the marginal life of a lesbian. There was no turning back. I left my husband and moved to San Francisco. Becoming an activist, I joined the movement. I was rethinking the world.

Yes, it was all about power and class—those in control decided who would get the degrees, the money, and the privileges. As I learned to express my ideas, I found that people wanted to hear them. This encouraged me to articulate my thoughts. I joined with activists who had dreams of a better world and wanted to transform this one. Even the way I was beginning to think about history, in class terms, was empowering.

The act of working to change the world we lived in, my world, also forced me to use speech. I used language for social change. I, who hadn't been able to complete a sentence, was speaking before large groups. I learned how to make long speeches, give classes, express ideas clearly, concisely, and give others space to talk as well. I became a leader. I even ran for mayor as a socialist. I had unwittingly become comfortable in English. It wasn't magic, it was self-confidence. I was valued as an equal: that is the story of my empowerment. My life as a woman activist gave me the gift of speech!

My written language was also cultivated by the political work I did. I wrote journalistic and publicity pieces, I even translated documents from Russian and Serbo-Croatian for Pathfinder Press and other publishing projects. Finding like-minded people to share the delights of translation to cull an important text was what I had wanted for so long. I felt valued and I was making a contribution to the world.

I was suddenly completely myself. I was a lesbian, a writer, an immigrant's daughter, an activist. I was respected for who I was. I had blossomed, and speech did not fail me any longer. I loved the challenges of language, of words, of speech.

"Integration with one's context, as distinct from adaptation, is a distinctively human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality," wrote Paolo Freire.

We are fortunate to be living in a time of multicultural awareness. But what does that actually mean? Are cultural identities immutable? How does a new culture affect us? Can we really understand the culture of another person? Do we ask our students to give up values, traditions, dreams in order to fit into the U.S.? How do we actually help our students articulate their deepest thoughts and needs? Brazilian educator, writer, and activist Paolo Freire, who had such a progressive influence on English teaching and other disciplines, has urged us to involve our students, not impose our culture, but to nurture them, be equals with them, appreciate their context. Who can

argue with that? To put this into practice we ourselves must be constantly critical of our world and ourselves. Believing in our students, expecting the best may help them more than anything.

I think of my adult ESL students and how powerless they must feel in our society. Some do not have legal documentation for residency, some have to struggle so hard with the language, some can't keep a job, some feel emotionally overwhelmed, and some are traumatized. They come to a classroom setting, familiar to us but not them, and again they feel they don't belong. If a student is gay or transgender, or a son or daughter or mother or father is, this is a further complication in his/her life. If she is ashamed of her religion, if he is uncomfortable about expressing his political views, he or she cannot relax. We all want to be accepted and appreciated for who we are. And students have such enormous resources of knowledge and know-how within and among themselves. Sharing experiences and learning about each other's cultures can be so affirming.

Eva Hoffman makes a relevant analogy: "You can't transport human meanings whole from one culture to another any more than you can transliterate a text." The feelings of our students as they go through the process of learning English and acculturating are not easily revealed either. They have complicated lives and difficulties beyond our comprehension. Many of my adult ESL students, for example, say they have come to the U.S. for freedom. Do they really feel free here? Many have come to escape war or oppression. What have they left behind?

At City College of San Francisco, I taught a beginning ESL class at the time of the U.S. bombing of Yugoslavia and Kosovo. I had a few Bosnian students in my class, as well as students from Vietnam, Guatemala, Mexico, the Middle East, China, South America, and other regions. I did not hear any approval of U.S. and NATO roles in this war. I heard about the pain that war had caused in some of the students' lives, and I heard surprise at U.S. actions. That semester, the students were journaling once a week. Although limited in their language, many were able to respond to the war on paper. One student wrote of her hopes and how nurturing the positive qualities in one another can repair the damage of war. She had found a way to write a profound and useful response with her limited English. Other students also wrote what they couldn't express in class. Writing organizes thoughts. Students gain confidence in their abilities to communicate, especially if errors are not the focus.

Teachers do not give students the gift of language, they find it themselves. We give them opportunities. Trying to understand their thoughts, experiences, and cultures is a way of giving them an opening to communicate with us. Cultural practices and backward

ideas can be discussed and opinions shared. I also share my own struggle with language with them when appropriate. I tell them I was transformed by becoming who I am—a lesbian, a writer, an activist, a teacher. As their teacher I try to show them how crucial language is.

We learn by asking our own questions, solving problems, clarifying feelings and experiences in language. We cannot remind one another of this often enough. In James Baldwin's words: "The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not."



Can Factory Sonnets

*Thou blind fool, Love, what
dost thou to mine eyes,
That they behold, and see not
what they see?
They know what beauty is, see
where it lies,
Yet what the best is take the
worst to be.
If eyes, corrupt by over-partial
looks,
Be anchor'd in the bay where
all men ride,
Why of eyes' falsehood hast
thou forged hooks,
Whereto the judgment of my
heart is tied?
Why should my heart think that
a several plot
Which my heart knows the
wide world's common place?
Or mine eyes, seeing this, say
this is not,
To put fair truth upon so foul a
face?*

*In things right true my heart
and eyes have err'd,
And to this false plague are
they now transferr'd.*

William Shakespeare

Karen must have snorted a line. And she's smoking pot again. She is in another world, avoiding me. I've told her before I can't deal with her in that space, but no, she keeps doing it. She may have lost interest in me anyway, for all I know. I want to say something. I just can't stay in this threesome much longer. I am so sick and tired of Linda and her drunken stupors. It's time for me to bail out, but I feel lured, fooled. Those girlfriends need me and I need them. I just can't let go.

The noise was unbearable in that can factory. It was like jackhammers but more metallic and hollow. Constant clamor of machinery and can tops. Management's drive was to keep the place going one hundred per cent, all the time. Monotonous assembly-line work, deadening to the human spirit. Continental Can intended to get the most out of their new technology, so there was no stopping the job consolidation that was underway. Fewer workers meant fewer human variables. I knew management's psychology.

My poor feet! Some people get headaches, some people get back pain. My stress went right to my feet. Working all night, standing up, was pure torture. I ached all over when my feet hurt. The effort of staying up all night and tolerating the pain in my body felt like an act of survival during that long year of employment at the can plant. To this day I can't believe I stayed so long. The pay wasn't even that good.

It was Karen's kisses that held me like a spider web. I was suspended in time, endlessly wrapped up in her thin, sticky threads. Those long dangerous, mushy smooches in the green restroom at work, up against the wall, in that tingly, exhausted state of fighting sleep, when we were desperate. She took me by the waist and wrapped her arms around me while I weakly said, "Not here." She kept in step with me as we waltzed across the gray cement floor in our steel-toed boots and I melted. Her firm lips came down on mine—she was taller than me, and I'm five foot nine. I curled into her soft breasts like I had nowhere else to go.

She listened for the door as I let my body rest against the wall. No one ever walked in on us, but there were several close calls. We were saved by the divider that jutted out in front of the door to safeguard "women's privacy," said one of the men. The seconds we had after we heard Bessie or Pat or someone else swing the door open did not wipe away our sweet blushes, though we tried to be cool. They walked in, talking, tired, their heads hanging down. They didn't pay much attention to us.

I met Karen at the Continental Can plant in Edison, New Jersey in 1986, where I got a job as a production worker even though I was a journeyman machinist. Human Resources promised to promote me to technician if I proved capable enough. The techs were all men and the production workers were almost all women. Our job was to pack the can lids stamped out by the machines and load them onto pallets. It didn't take much skill. The techs had to keep their assigned machines running and make sure they were churning out quality lids. I had been a machinist for four years at an aircraft repair facility and four years before that in various production shops, including CNC (computerized machinery) building M-1 tanks at FMC. I was more qualified to handle

one of the higher-paying tech jobs one of the higher paying tech jobs at Continental Can than some of the men who got hired, but the dyke personnel director wanted me to prove myself. It was always that way, but getting shafted by a sister just proved once again it didn't matter that a woman was in charge.

The job sounded more appealing when I heard it was three days on and two days off. In actuality, I was so exhausted on my days off that all I could do was catch up on sleep and maybe do laundry and food shopping. I didn't know how people with kids managed this job. We only had one ten-minute break before our half-hour lunch and one ten-minute break after. We got cheated in those twelve-hour shifts because there should have been another ten-minute break in there, but the union didn't enforce it. To leave our stations for the restroom we had to wave down a relief man who was often being used for other work in the warehouse, so it was easier just to wait until break.

Night after night I stood on the slatted platform. Groups of 278 can lids on three separate tracks, one above the other, jiggled and jangled their way in front of me. Using my forefinger and middle finger, I shoved them into long paper bags with, then flipped the top of the bag over and swung it onto a neatly stacked pallet, a row of sixteen alternating with a row of seventeen so they wouldn't fall off. Each pallet held 247 bags—68,666 lids. Boring beyond belief, the work was also backbreaking. And the noise was not only deafening but it shook your entire body. I often lost all sense of myself as a person in that place. Shakespeare, poetry, and the thought of beautiful music saved me. I clung to Auden's "Lay your sleeping head, my love, / Human on my faithless arm." I longed to sleep in someone's arms and be soothed and loved for who I was: "Mortal, guilty, but to me / The entirely beautiful."

Cackle, cackle, cackle, changle, changle, changle—a high-pitched unreproducible rattle that wouldn't stop and made you want to throw things. Imagine doing the shoving with the fingers, flipping the bag onto the pallet and as quickly as possible because you'd have to deal with the next row sooner than you could finish. For twelve hours you drove your body like a big truck to keep up with the machine. If your line stopped, a big red flashing light went off at your station, and the foreman and everyone else knew you had messed up and shut the machine down.

I was drawn to Karen from the first moment I saw her in that thunderous plant. I felt an intense rush inside, close to my heart, with the world crashing down around me. Or at least I wished it would crash and crush all those cans. Her deep green eyes pulled me across the piled pallets, a lifeline to love and affection, like a sniff of that white powder. Despite her silky long hair and her soft, almost babyish

face, she looked so butch, so tough and strong. I wanted to lean against her big body whenever I saw her on the plant floor, to bring my hands up to her shoulders and nuzzle my face against hers.

I learned a lot about Karen from the start, and I wondered how I could want someone like her. We'd sit in the restroom, lingering, relishing, avoiding going back to work. "I really love pot," she'd tell me, "and coke just blows my mind. I wish I could have it more often." I sat there not knowing what to say because I never did drugs and didn't like being around them.

"Did you ever freebase?" she asked. I barely knew what that meant.

"No," I said. "I don't do drugs. It's just too scary if you get caught. And they can easily frame you up too. I don't mess with the stuff." Back in my teenage years, this guy I went out with kept trying to get me to smoke dope. After a few drags, I was either afraid of losing control or overcome by an intense feeling of paranoia.

The crazy atmosphere in the plant was conducive to drugs—the noise, the time pressure, the night work, the repetition. There were a couple of techs and a new young white woman, Pat, who did cocaine. She got thinner and thinner the longer she worked there. What a waste! I guess I got high by thinking about sex, fantasizing about Karen or someone else I couldn't have, that unattainable pleasure. Was that the same as a drug?

Those 6:00 a.m. mornings in Edison were cold and incredibly lonely. To work all night and drive home to Newark, then sleep through the day gives you a true understanding of the word zombie.

When we went out for breakfast to the Edison Diner one morning after work, the waitress was pale and drawn, shadows under her eyes. "I've been up all night," she said.

"So have we," I told her. There was an instant bond between us. She touched my shoulder and smiled weakly. That camaraderie was better than a perfect breakfast. Only other night workers can truly get it.

Did Shakespeare ever have it? That feeling of blood pumping up from your legs to keep you going, your breath getting shorter, your heart beating faster and closer to your chest. You see the world all glimmery, you want strange things. You get a certain adrenaline rush after conquering the night like that, but meanwhile you've given away so much. You spend your off days recovering, sleeping, getting your life together for the next two nights. You can't really socialize because everyone else is on a different time schedule, a different plane of existence.

I could see why people did coke. You had to do something to get through the insane hours and grueling work, and you might as well do

something that gave you a push to keep going. Me, I alternated my sex fantasies with Shakespeare.

Before work I'd write out one of my favorite sonnets that I wanted to memorize on a tiny piece of paper. I wouldn't want my ever-vigilant boss to notice. I'd tuck it into my jeans, reach for it whenever I had a hand free, and bask in the next line. Sometimes I would lay the paper in a strategic position at my station; while I worked I could see it on the shelf above my rows of can lids or near the pile of paper bags stamped with numbers.

"When my love swears she is made of truth, / I do believe her, though I know she lies..." I'd say the lines over and over till Will's rhythms overpowered the clamoring machines.

Before the romance started, Karen and I would sometimes maneuver our way off our machines simultaneously for a break in the ladies' room. It wasn't easy because there were only two relief men and one was a jerk, a real company man. He would tell the supervisor if the relief break was too long. In the quiet of the pukey green room, we sat on the couch, sometimes complaining about the techs or about Andy, our foreman, who looked like Gomer Pyle with a stick up his ass.

One day I confided to Karen that I memorized Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson and other poets on the line to keep from going insane.

"That's pretty cool," she said with a laugh. "You know, I write songs."

"Really, what kind?" I was thrilled. I had always felt attracted to musicians.

"Well, they're kind of like folk songs, but they're not like anyone's I know."

"That's really great!"

"You know Tony's a jazz musician?" Tony was one of the few male operators.

"All right! I'm in good company—I write poetry."

"God, isn't it awful that artists have to work in this pit?" Karen grimaced.

"Yes." I grew sad thinking of the machines stamping out those endless lids and people being forced to follow the machine rhythms. "No one should have to do this work."

"Why don't you come over sometime and I'll play you my songs. I only live five minutes away."

And that's how it started. I was curious not only about her songs but about the way she lived. That green-eyed gaze of hers offered some deep connection. I thought she might be into women, but she hadn't said anything so far. Some greater power had taken me over, as

if I couldn't make choices where Karen was concerned. I wanted so much to go home with her right then.

One day she told me, "I'm not getting along with my friend anymore. Her drinking is really bugging me." She checked my face. "We've been together almost five years now." I realized she was coming out to me—the "friend" euphemism.

"I just broke up with a girlfriend who started getting involved with someone else," I shared. We both smiled, happy to confirm our mutual suspicions. She didn't know how much I needed her then, how much I needed to feel important to her.

I lived about forty minutes away from the plant, and sometimes stayed with my friend Anna at her house on the way to Newark, partly because I couldn't make it all the way home and partly because she was such a dear and so willing to take care of me in the mornings. Her girlfriend worked days, and Anna worked the afternoon shift. I loved waking up in their quiet spare room with the bookshelves piled high and the sewing machine and ironing board unfolded in the middle of the room. At two in the afternoon I still had time to visit with Anna for an hour before she left for her job at the Newark Airport. She talked to me and fixed me breakfast no matter how grumpy I was.

My own apartment was lonely and bare in comparison. My friends had quit calling me because they didn't know when I would be sleeping. The job was wrecking my life and I was still pissed about my ex cheating on me. Anna listened to my harangues and offered compassion. I told her about my feelings for Karen and that she had a girlfriend who drank. She warned me to be careful. Then I stopped mentioning Karen. It was embarrassing.

After Anna left I'd take a shower, slowly get my things together, and make my way down the Garden State Parkway to that grinding pit. I'd walk across the machine-gunning plant floor toward the ladies' room and my locker. More lids were spewing forth from the great stamping machines, pallet upon pallet of them taken away to be stored awaiting shipment. Where were they all going? The place never shut down—twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, even the day a snowstorm shut most of the area down for business and closed schools. I felt nauseous just thinking about it—Budweiser can lids!

One morning at the last break, Karen announced to me wearily, "Linda never came to pick me up yesterday morning. She overslept."

I asked how she got home. "Dave gave me a ride." Dave was a forklift driver. "I just hope it won't happen again. I'm tired of this." She shook her head and looked down.

"Well, I'll give you a ride this morning if she doesn't show."

"Great, Sonja! I'd really appreciate that." Her face lit up. I was glad I could bring out her smile. "And you know you can stay awhile."

I'll play you some of my songs. Would you like that?"

"Sure!"

"You know you can stay over anytime you want." She was on a roll. "I know you have a place you can stay at with your friends but you could stay with us too sometimes."

My body was weak and tired, so was my mouth. "I just hate driving all the way back home. It's so lonely to go to sleep during the day in my apartment, wake up exhausted, and then turn around and drive back to this hellhole. I'd love to stay with you sometime."

Her eyes embraced me warmly, and she reached out and touched my arm.

What would Shakespeare think of all this? I was working on "Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea" at my station, my tired soul recalling the images and cadences:

O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wreckful siege of battering days,
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?

I didn't feel very strong. My pull toward Karen, who already had a partner, came from weakness and pain. Nothing good could come of all this Karen stuff, Anna was right.

One night as Karen and I were sitting on the couch in the ladies' room, we heard one of the guys complaining outside the door as it opened. "How come we don't have a couch? What is this, discrimination?"

"It's because we have periods," Bessie yelled. "And shut your mouth!"

"Aw, those weak little girls need a couch to put up their little feet," whined another tech.

In walked Connie and Bessie with disgusted looks on their faces. Their machines had shut down and they were taking a break. Usually there were never more than two of us in there at a time. Bessie was a fun-loving large black woman whose rich laugh could cheer anyone up. "What's going on here? You two look so serious," she said in a loud voice. The noise made us all talk louder than normal because we got used to yelling in people's plugged ears above the din on the plant floor.

Connie was already at her locker. "Hi, girls!" she said as she stretched her arm up to the top shelf for her well-worn paper bag containing a pint of whiskey that kept her going all night. She took a long swig from the bottle she somberly called her cough medicine. Her dark skin was drawn and even darker around her eyes. Connie

and Bessie were so different from each other, but they were the best of friends. They were the only two black women working at the plant.

Karen stood up. "I better get back out there and see if my machine is running again. Charlie shut it down just to give me a break. He's covering for me. Isn't that nice of him?" We all agreed he was the nicest of all the techs. I moved over on the couch to let Connie and Bessie sit down and rest their weary feet, but Bessie didn't want to sit. She was wound up. She danced and mimicked our motions at our stations. "Don't we look like fools out there?" I jumped up to join her. We jerked our hands from side to side loading those bags, swishing our hips, then wiping our brows. It looked like a line dance. We all burst out laughing.

Feeling the blues one day, I trudged over to Bessie's machine while a tech was adjusting mine. I wanted some of her cheerfulness to rub off on me.

"What could you be depressed about? You shouldn't have any worries. You don't even have a family." Then she said, "I love life," with such gusto that her voice lifted clear above the rattling can tops. But Bessie's life hadn't been easy. She even had a big long scar on her arm from when some man cut her with a knife. "I had to protect my kids," she told me once. Her joking and upbeat attitude were survival mechanisms.

The red light at my station nagged at me. I still felt down as I plodded back to my machine.

Later that night I passed Karen's station. She was stooped over, her shoulders sloping too much for a twenty-two-year-old. I so wanted to hold her and assure her everything would be all right. I moved closer to her ear. We all did this, but I hated it when that gross foreman, Jack, did it. He took the opportunity to lean against my body. Ugh! I always moved away fast.

At a respectful distance, I yelled into Karen's ear, "I want to listen to your songs. Maybe I'll stay over today." Suddenly I had a *déjà vu* and wondered if I had already said this to her in the restroom. Was I repeating myself? My mind wasn't functioning right.

She backed off and smiled at me. "Great! Only two and a half hours to go!"

Leaving the plant in the morning was a terrific feeling. We all walked out in a huge wave. Dave was behind me. "Get outta my way, I have a date with a pillow," he said, smiling for the first time all night. Karen and I waited awhile in the parking lot, but Linda never showed. I tried to cheer Karen up as we drove to her apartment complex, which was farther down the road from the factory, but she looked sad and preoccupied. My mother's face came to me—how glum she looked when she and my father weren't speaking to each other

after a fight.

"I'm really getting tired of this," Karen said in a low voice. "She's always drunk these days. I can't even talk to her. ...Well, maybe she just overslept."

We got to the apartment. Karen bent down to pet a cat waiting at the front door. "Hi, Snuggles!"

She unlocked the door, and we walked slowly up the shag-carpeted stairs. All was quiet. When Karen reached the top stair she yelled, "I knew it!" I looked around. The house was a wreck—to me, it looked like someone had broken in. Beer cans, some crushed, littered the living room. The dining table was covered with dirty dishes and more beer cans. A bag of potato chips lay in the middle of the floor. Karen and Linda had furniture, dishes, all the props of a settled married life, but the impression was that something terrible had gone wrong. A stuffy, barlike atmosphere filled the room—that stench of beer and smoke.

Linda was slumped on the large gray couch, dead asleep. Karen went over to her and shook her. "Hey, Lindy darlin', you can't keep doing this. Aren't you going to work?"

I felt uncomfortable, like I was with a couple of mentally disturbed women and didn't know how to conduct myself. How could Linda go to work? Wasn't Karen angry at her? I felt confused by her sweet tone.

As Karen was talking softly, Linda suddenly got up and shuffled over to me like a robot. Karen held her hand, walking along with her, introducing us: "Sonja, this is Linda; Linda, this is Sonja."

We shook hands. "Sonja," Linda said in a shaky deep voice, "I like that name, it's unusual. Karen told me about you." Then she lifted her head and swept her free hand in the air grandly, enunciating each word. "How do you like our mess?"

I shrugged and smiled at her. She had dark blue eyes; they looked sad and watery. Her hair was blond and stringy, her head drooped forward.

My discomfort with their intimacy doubled when Karen turned to Linda as if she were a child. "Now look, this is the last time I'm going to tell you this. You can't do this no more. I don't mind if you have a couple of beers, but you can't keep getting drunk and passing out."

"I think I should go," I said.

"No," Karen said firmly, coming close, a pleading look on her face: "You've got to stay. Please, I need you now. I really need you." I said okay, but I didn't know what I was agreeing to. She walked away, leaving me and Linda standing there. I watched her run her fingers through her hair. I really wanted to help her—she deserved better.

"I gotta take a piss," Linda said, her voice trembling. She left the

room.

Karen turned and looked at me sadly. I walked over to her and put my hand on her shoulder. "Are you sure you want me to stay?" She nodded, then reached her arm around me, and we blended into a friend-hug. I felt so sorry for her. Maybe I could love her as she she deserved to be loved.

Linda watched intently from the bathroom door. "Well, I'll make you two some breakfast, and then you need to get some sleep. Are you staying over, Sonja?"

I said I didn't know.

Karen glared at me. "I thought you were." I felt I was getting into something very messy, but I was tired.

Linda said she was going to work, but before that they changed the sheets. Linda bragged in her shaky, deep voice, "I did the laundry yesterday. Isn't it great to have clean sheets?" Clothes were strewn around the bedroom, beer cans stuck out among papers, money, socks, deodorant, and other stuff on the bureau. Karen and I got into bed, and Linda tucked us in, her hands shaking. I was grateful for the freshness, the clean-smelling comfort of the sheets around my body. It was utterly wonderful, even though it was bizarre to be left in their bed with Karen.

Linda shut the door quietly. I started getting aroused, being so close to Karen with just our tee shirts and underpants on. She turned her head and looked at me with a smile. "Goodnight." Her hair cascaded over the white pillow. I wanted her so badly, but my eyes wouldn't stay open.

The alarm woke me, and my first thought was—what's wrong? It was so bright out. I had been doing this for the last eight months, and I always felt the same surprise at the dazzling daylight after a sleep. Then I realized where I was.

Karen turned off the loud intermittent beep. She turned on her side, facing me. "How did you sleep?" I put my arm around her and drew her close. I wanted to kiss her and make love to her, merge with her, lose myself in her. She kissed me on the lips slowly, with a little flutter of her tongue. Then she was above me, riding me, and it was great.

After we both came, I rolled over on my back and sighed. "That was so fine." No longer a mere cog in the wheel at the can plant, I was a person now, loved and satisfied. I felt a divine aliveness.

Shakespeare lived before the industrial revolution. Did he know how inhuman work would become in the future? This would be the most violent stage, the late twentieth century, with more wars and workplace fires and catastrophes and battles. Capitalism feeds on destruction and violence, said Rosa Luxemburg, but I am just thinking

it just can't last that much longer.

Karen started talking, "You know Linda and me been talking about opening things up a little and inviting someone else into our relationship. Would you like to join us?" This was unexpected—she sounded like she was inviting me to dinner or something. I thought we could have an affair, but was she suggesting a threesome?

"Think about it," she said after a pause. "Linda whispered in my ear that she liked you. You don't have to say anything now," she added, noticing my inability to speak. "It's just something for you to think about. It's your choice."

Shakespeare was just saying a couple of months ago: "O cunning Love! with tears thou keep'st me blind,/ Lest eyes well-seeing thy foul faults should find." I felt teary, tired, blind, and those f's Shakespeare was warning me with—was I about to be fffucked over? But despite all this I felt drawn, or maybe because of all this.

I asked Karen if she'd play me her songs. "Sure," she said. "A little later."

After breakfast she pulled out her guitar and began her melancholy love songs. I was impressed. She was good. Her style reminded me a lot of Ferron, the Canadian lesbian singer. I asked Karen if she had ever heard of her. "No," she said. "These are all my very own ideas. I'm trying to learn the blues now." She had never heard of women's music. I introduced her to an entire genre of lesbian songwriting and poetry: Cris Williamson, Meg Christian, Linda Tillery—all those names were new to her. She and Linda didn't have other lesbian friends either. I was amazed that someone so interested in music and women had never heard of Olivia Records.

I began making copies of tapes and records for her. She was thrilled and fell deeply in love with Ferron, referring to lines in her songs when we were at work. I grew to like Ferron in a different way through Karen's eyes, appreciating more her poetry and melancholy.

Linda formally asked me to join their relationship the next time I was there. I read a falseness in her compliments—my eyes, my smile. Karen chimed in enthusiastically after each compliment with: "Doesn't she?" They both told me about the porn videos they had recently rented and how they got turned on by them.

"I loved watching the scenes with the women," said Karen. She never used the word lesbian or any of our other words, just "ladies" or "women" or "girls."

"Maybe we could all have sex together sometime, if you want to Sonja," Linda said, nudging me. "I know Karen would really like it. She likes you a lot." I felt like a sex object.

It was those bedtime kisses with Karen I craved. We'd be in bed in the daylight, at eight in the morning, after working all night. Our

raglike bodies returned to some semblance of human sensitivity as we lay close and kissed softly, assuring each other we would go no further without Linda, who would be out in the living room getting ready for work or having another beer to avoid going to work. Karen and I held each other and I got wet with excitement. Her kisses drove me wild. She was food after a fast, a pool during a heat wave, an answer to a prayer. We didn't even have to worry about being discovered. Linda could just jump in with us.

I wasn't attracted to Linda, but I had to admit I wasn't completely opposed to a threesome. Still, Linda made me uncomfortable, like she wasn't real or something. Plus she had a special hold on Karen that I could never have, as if she knew some secret that I could never know.

I wanted Karen very badly. Karen wanted me too but was devoted to Linda. She pleaded with me, "Come on, Sonja. Just try being lovers with both of us. We can have a three-way. I'll give up drugs, all of it, even pot." I was impressed. Maybe I could try this out. Giving up pot for me meant something serious. The job was seriously affecting my brain.

The pot smoking and the beer were issues for me. I wanted to prevent both women from falling into a deep hole. What an illusion of power I had! Once when I came to stay over, Karen took out some weed and started smoking. A round tent was set up in the middle of the living room. Karen laughed about how she and Linda had played camping the day before and how funny it was. I imagined them both high and bleary-eyed.

"You want some?" Karen said, offering me the joint.

"No." I put on my hardest face. "Look, I can't stay."

"What do you mean?" she protested. "Is it the pot? I'll get rid of it. It's not important to me." I knew it was a lie, but I wanted to believe her. She walked over and put her arm around me.

"Look, I told you, I don't even want to be in the house when it's here."

Karen patted me and put the stuff away. "I'll have it out of the house by the next time you come. Don't worry. Trust me."

We went into the bedroom. I didn't feel so firm anymore. Linda was in bed. She woke up and said sweetly, "Hey, Pie. Hey, Sonja. It's nice to see you. Can you give me a little hug?" She was looking at both of us and speaking to us as if we were children.

We each gave her a hug. Then Karen and I traded places with Linda who in turn tucked us in, giving us both equally long kisses. The threesome had begun.

Karen smiled at Linda adoringly. "We have to do this on Lindy's day off and when we're not working the next night."

Linda left reluctantly.

I fished for something to say. "I like Linda. She's hot, especially when she's not drinking beer." We heard the front door close. I didn't know where that lie came from. All I knew was that I had Karen, Karen pulling me on top of her and running her hands all over my body. My cunt swelled against hers. She kissed me hungrily, her lips molding mine, drawing my tongue out to explore her mouth, opening to me.

As I look back at the relationship, it was as if something out of my control was taking place. We all three made love together several times, but for me it was just a way to have Karen. Linda didn't seem very interested in sex anyway. She seemed to be doing the threesome for Karen's sake. I lost myself in this setup, and it took me a long time to get myself back. The loneliness and fatigue at the plant didn't help. I wanted so badly to escape.

"Thou blind fool, Love, what dost thou to mine eyes," said Will. "that they behold, and see not what they see?" I began to wonder about what I was calling Love.

This went on for about three months, Ferron's music becoming a big part of our relationship. What threw me for a loop was our trip to the Southern Women's Music Festival in the Georgia countryside—to see Ferron, among other singers. We were all very excited about taking the trip together. While we were getting ready, it was Ferron this and Ferron that. I was also excited about introducing my friends to the lesbian subculture I was so familiar with—not only the music but the books, tee shirts, crafts, a whole way of life apart from the straight world we were mainly involved with at work. I told them that women walked around the festival topless and some even naked. Karen and Linda were titillated. We talked about how we would set up our tent. We planned to stay together, but I took my small orange backpacking tent just in case. It turned out to be a necessity.

The three of us piled into my little Dodge Colt. First, I told them no beer was allowed while driving. They complied for about half the ride. An argument ensued when we stopped somewhere in North Carolina for gas and Linda got herself "a tall one."

"We're not in the car, we're just standing here," she said defensively. "We're just taking a little break, Sonja. Damn!"

I began to wonder how this much-anticipated trip would end up. I was already feeling on the warpath.

At the festival we set up our tent. The next day Karen and Linda moved to another spot farther off. I set up my own orange one where we had started out. It was a nice spot under some trees, and some friends of mine from Alabama were nearby. I was happy to be with them.

We heard Ferron in concert the first night. For Karen it was a

dream come true. Linda stayed for a little while, but the crowd made her panic and she beelined for her tent. Karen left soon after the concert to keep her darling Pie company. Their “Pie” names were irritating the hell out of me. Feeling very excluded, I shrugged and waved her on. “Go ahead. Miss the whole festival!” Karen knew I was pissed. The hugs, kisses, and hot sex ended at the festival.

Linda had somehow found a way to purchase a case of beer, which she hoarded for herself. Except for listening to Ferron and a couple of other concerts, Karen stuck by her girlfriend, protecting her from the “overwhelming” atmosphere and their first experience with “hordes of lesbians.” I was not only fed up with their distance but with Linda’s obsession with her beer. They were realigning their relationship against the world, and against me. Even the looks on their faces allied against me. That first night after the Ferron concert I cried in my tent. I felt lonely and terrified I was losing them—no, it was Karen I was afraid of losing.

On the drive back to New Jersey, Karen teamed up with Linda in defying the no-drinking-in-the-car rule. When we stopped along the way for gas, Karen sat apart with her lover and sniped at me. “You can’t tell us what to do. Who do you think you are?”

I grew more and more angry. I knew Karen was right, and I knew I had lost her. We were quiet on the way home, compared to the bubbling excitement driving down to Georgia. I looked darkly at Karen when she nonchalantly started smoking weed. I was defeated—she was acting like a teenager. But, as she said, who was I to tell them what to do? They withdrew from me, dropping me like an empty can.

Back home, the job wrung everything out of me. After working at the can plant for almost a year, six of us suddenly got laid off right after the festival trip. Karen didn’t get cut. For me, being laid off was a gift. I went one last time to Edison to visit Karen and Linda. We were civil to one another, but with none of the old intimacies. The game was over.

“The angels—happening that way / This dusty heart espied— / Tenderly took it up from toil / And carried it to God—“ soothed Emily Dickinson.

I never wanted to set foot in Edison, New Jersey again. For a long time after, whenever I walked into a 7-Eleven or bought beer or soda, I’d check the can tops in the store to see if they were made in Edison. The number stamped on the top was my clue.

Woman Machinist

It was almost time to punch out. I was tired, and my arms were covered in oil elbow-deep. And you can't work on precision tool settings with rubber gloves, so it was inescapable, those tiny brass shavings getting under my skin. I wondered what happened to them. Did they bring on the rash I had up and down my arms? I wiped my arms with a rag, planning to wash up after I collected my tools and rolled my toolbox over to the dull gray side wall where all the other toolboxes were. My feet hurt. I was getting tired of this job.

As I made my way to the restroom, I looked around at all the operators mechanically pulling down their drill presses and unloading those little brass covers. That was their daily routine—over and over, the same thing. I had done operator work myself in the beginning. Most of the operators were older women who had worked at the lock company for decades. Mary had arm problems and called in sick more often now. They were going to bring in an ergonomics expert. Who knew when? And for her only? The whole place needed help. I really felt for the operators, wouldn't want to have their jobs.

Josefina would sometimes shout something in Spanish and jump out of her seat, her curly blond hair bobbing as she marched vehemently over to the windows and flung open one or two, muttering and stomping all the way. Desi, the operator inspector, leaned over to me one day when I was watching Josie: "She's going through her Change." I wasn't too sure what that meant, being only thirty five myself. Desi was looking at me with her big dark-brown eyes as if she were waiting for a comeback in a comedy routine. I just smiled. Now, of course, I know Josie was having hot flashes—because I experienced them myself later in life. I don't think people who haven't had a hot flash can really understand that intense rush and sudden overheated feeling, often accompanied by a need to shout. At that time, I had no idea. I just thought Josie was a little crazy.

Now Desi had an interesting story. She was short and thin with long dark hair, an older Mexican American, maybe sixty, barely a touch of an accent, a woman who seemingly went busily and capably about her inspecting work, but what really captured her attention and kept her working was Cliff, one of the toolmakers. He was a partly bald, leathery, white guy, always smiling and soft-spoken, despite his biker look (and he did have a Harley). He was about her age, they both had families and they had been carrying on their affair for over ten years. I didn't quite get how their families managed to accept the whole thing, but apparently the families even socialized together. Nobody got divorced. Cliff and Desi were in a relationship, a given

both at work and outside of work.

After I locked my box and washed up, I walked over to see Gary in his quiet room. Gary was the lead inspector. Locks required precision so inspection was an important part of the process. He sat in a clean bright room with all kinds of instrumentation. It was nice and quiet in there, as opposed to the plant floor. Gary was my buddy. I liked talking with him at second break and would have liked having lunch with him, but he spent it with his African American friends and I didn't fit in.

I told Gary I was thinking about quitting my job, quitting machine shop work entirely, and traveling to Russia. "If I had a chance like that, I'd leave in a heartbeat," he said, "but I gotta stay here and keep this going for my family till retirement. You're still young and single. Take the opportunity. You'll regret it if you don't."

I didn't really need Gary's approval for this huge life decision I was making, I just wanted to hear what he'd say, and in his words I began to sense the immensity of his dependence on this job. How did he keep going? I knew he was bored, but he had social connections at work and that probably helped sustain him as he strove to meet his family obligations. I started thinking about how close to slavery this kind of work was in its own way—mouths to feed, bills to be paid, kids to be sent to college, all of it keeping people like Gary in what amounted to indentured servitude. He was tired of the place but he felt bound to it.

I looked at him and tried to take it all in. "You're right, Gary. I need to do this. It's calling me. Thanks."

Why Russia? Years earlier I had graduated from NYU with a master's in Russian Literature, and had developed a strong interest in the country and culture. Then I tried to get my Ph.D. in comparative literature but was stymied by classist and sexist barriers at U.C. Berkeley. They didn't want me in their ranks. But how did I get from there to becoming a machinist? That's a more interesting story.

It was 1977, toward the end of the civil rights movement, and at the height of the anti-war movement, the women's movement and the movement against intervention in Central America. I had married a physics professor and we'd moved out to California when he got a job at Stanford Research Institute. I had spent a year or so taking classes at Berkeley before they rejected me, and then I taught a class in Shakespeare at Foothill College. My husband was invited to the University of Birmingham in England to do research, and I went with him. We packed up and left for six months, occupying a little carriage house next to a larger house with a beautifully pruned garden in Birmingham. There I sulked over my failure at Berkeley and began to write and read about my future pursuits. I learned about Marxism and

became captivated by the women's movement, even letting myself heed my sexual dreams about women.

One day when I was walking around London, I noticed a small ad in a travel agency window. I don't know what drew me to read that hand-printed note in an out-of-the way street, but it said something like: "Looking for two more people to join a group tour to Russia: Moscow, Leningrad and Talinn, Estonia." It was leaving in a month. Reading that ad changed my life. Or did meeting the person, who had also seen the small sign, change my life?

I joined the group, which turned out to be a bunch of British Marxists who wanted to know more about the Soviet Union. Gina, an American, traveling through Europe on her own, had already joined them. I met her in the waiting area of the airport, and she would become my lover and mentor, the main shaker and mover in my earthquake coming-out experience. A relationship with her would move me out of my marriage. And it was she who helped me synthesize some of the feminist and socialist analyses that I had begun making in my own mind.

I found myself in an aware and engaged group of people, so different from the people I had known in the Bronx and in academia. Daniel, the group leader, explained that when we were on the trains in Russia we should help the workers by picking up after ourselves. Penny was in a London political theater group that put on short plays on social or political themes and then had discussions with the audiences. The people in the tour group had a genuine interest in the lives of Russians, beyond just seeing the Hermitage. They even asked me to be a translator for some of the meetings we had with various organizations and individuals. I felt useful and needed, the best medicine for my depression. When Gina explained how a Marxist analysis helped give perspective on life, I began to study history in a different way, a class way, and to form a new world view. The late 1970s was a courageous time, a time of struggle and excitement, a wonderful time to come out.



And why a machinist? A few years after this transformational trip, I joined the Socialist Workers Party whose members were turning to industry to get jobs, become union and political activists and work for social change. Two points of advocacy within our unions were: the need form a labor party to counter the two parties run by the rich and urging that U.S. workers to oppose U.S. intervention and war efforts in other countries. Since my future was no longer in academia, I was open to this idea. After a few jobs as a driver and a sewing machine operator, I picked up some trades skills and got enough help from a friend to apply for a machine operator position at FMC (the former Food Machinery Corporation, making M-1 tanks) in San Jose.

When I think now of some of the things that happened in those years to many of us comrades doing industrial work for the first time, it's a wonder I didn't quit or get myself killed. What a world I was getting into! I asked my coworkers for help on my first job, and they were very willing, so I learned a lot from peers, and from the mistakes I made because I was not used to being around machinery. One day when I was looking at the hole that my machine had just tapped on a housing, the drill press handle whipped around and hit me under the chin, chipping my tooth and cutting my lip. Pure inexperience and nervousness.

The people who were the most helpful to me had problems of their own. It turned out that Richard, the tall, dark-skinned man working right next to me on those housings for M-1 tanks, was a coke addict. One day he brought in some coke for me to try. It was the first time I had ever seen the white powder with my own eyes. Of course I turned him down. I had never been attracted to the drug scene, didn't even like marijuana when I tried it. The Socialist Workers Party was very strict about drugs, to avoid frame-ups and other trouble. The rule was that if anyone in the party did drugs, they were kicked out. Poor Richard, all bleary-eyed and hyper on the night shift, did not stop

offering me coke and didn't understand why I wouldn't want it. I wondered if getting people into it was part of drug addiction. At the same job I met John, another black man, who was in the Panthers and had done seasonal farm work in the past. I liked talking to him about the state of the world. There we were in San Jose, not too far from where the Black Panthers were founded in Oakland. The conversations and interactions I had at work really nurtured my political commitment.

These were the days of affirmative action, which was how I and many others could even get these skilled jobs. In several workplaces I was the only or the first woman machinist. I felt least isolated at the Alameda Naval Air Station, where there were ten other women machinists. One of them was called Red Sonia because of her hair, but soon they were to learn who the real Red Sonja was! Although it was a Navy base, civilian workers were unionized. There was a huge machine shop and it was the only place I ever worked where I filed a grievance against the supervisor—a military man who said I did not do good work. I won and he got transferred. There I met my wonderful friend Lorraine, who was from Brooklyn. We recognized each other instantly as fellow New Yorkers, but I think she had the thicker accent. She was African-American and funny as hell in a deadpan way. I loved laughing my head off with her at the guys with their big stomachs and their cracks showing: "Their asses are too small to hold their pants up." Lorraine and I helped each other when new jobs came along and we had to figure out the new setups.

The machine shop was more than a workplace. It was a social, psychological, and political arena where so much was acted out. Friends and enemies were made. I will never forget how some of the most "redneck" sexist guys stood up for basic democratic rights in an Alabama military aircraft repair facility I worked in. The idea to run for various political offices was part of our party's work. We did not aim to win the races, but to explain socialist politics. Eugene Debs was one of our heroes—he was the only U.S. socialist who got a significant hearing, and he even ran for president as the Socialist Party candidate in 1920 after he was imprisoned for sedition, getting six percent of the vote. He is particularly remembered for what he said at his 1918 sentencing: "while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

When I was asked by my party to run for mayor of Birmingham, Alabama in 1983, I was working in the machine shop of Hayes International, a large military aircraft repair plant. Nooses were left on my toolbox and my supporters' toolboxes. There were threats of beatings, and insults were flung around, but some respected coworkers

openly defended me and my right to run. Women in other parts of the plant came up to me as the election drew near and said, "I am so glad I can vote for a woman." Others who learned about my political concerns took the opportunity to discuss injustices in the plant and in society and the larger economic and political issues: better wages and working conditions for all, women's rights, black civil rights, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, keeping the U.S. out of Central America, and advocating for a labor party in the interests of working people.

While I was the only woman machinist, other women in the plant defended me and brought up these ideas in conversations. "There was so much shit said about women in general," my friend Mark told me, and it was hard to stand up to everything the men said. Throughout my time in industrial work whenever insults or heavier incidents came up, my party supported me—I was not alone. I learned to pick my battles in these discussions and keep in mind the longer view of what we were doing. Black workers defended us when we were called "N-lovers" and they were admired for their solidarity in defending their own people and us. We wanted to win hearts and minds to the ideas we were sharing, which were not so different from the concerns of many working people. We were not preaching. We were speaking to people about what they were experiencing and helping them make connections in politics.

A white-haired woman sheet metal worker started organizing lunchtime walks around the whole plant which was about seven hangars large. It was great exercise. First only a few people, mostly women, did these power walks, with Marian in the lead. By the time I joined there were more people, including men, and it was great. On my first walk I met Norma Mae, also a sheet-metal worker, who was a lesbian and an African American. We instantly recognized each other through gay-dar but also by dropping little hints like saying "my partner" or "my old girlfriend." We would talk about some of the history of Birmingham, the South, and the civil rights movement. She had a cousin who grew up in Montgomery and told the story of what happened during the bus boycott.

"When the call came to the high schools to march, the kids just came pouring out onto the streets, not one by one but rivers of kids, all converging on the street. My cousin was there and the news spread like wildfire. It was a great feeling." Norma Mae and I would talk about how this inspiring struggle affected everything else and how I thought it was key to the end of capitalism as we knew it. I don't know if she ever agreed about the bigger connections I tried to make, but our talking made her want to tell more stories.

"You see that hill over there?" she said one day when we were

outside the hangar having our lunch, as she pointed. "What do you think that is?" I couldn't make out anything but trees from a distance.

"It's a graveyard," she shouted as if I were an idiot. She looked at me with her mouth pursed and pointed seriously, her eyes peering at me through her glasses. "This side—white, that side—black," she said quietly.

"Still?" I asked. "Pretty much," she said.

Meeting Norma and all the people I have met over the years has made me feel so fortunate. Above all what I enjoyed about being a machinist was interacting with the people on the job. Otherwise, I would never have met Lorraine or Norma Mae or some of the others, because we live in a segregated and classist society. I learned what they were thinking and worrying about. I had long intellectual and political discussions with my friend Van in the tool room at Hayes. One day, Fred, one of the machinists, walked into our conversation and asked, "What do you two talk about all the time anyway?"

"Oh, a lot of things," said Van, smiling at me. "Like today we were talking about the solar system."

"The solar system? What's that?" asked Fred. Shocked, I told them I had to get back to my machine before my absence was noticed. Later Van confided in me that Fred really did not know what the solar system was and had never thought about what was in the sky and beyond our world. He may have been a casualty of narrow-minded religious beliefs. Even Van once asked about Jewish people: "Aren't they all rich?"

"Nope. Did you know Lea [one of my friends who worked in the plant] is Jewish?"

"Really?" he said, surprised. "I had no idea."

All our work in industry did have some effect. Not only did we talk about our ideas and win supporters and open up discussion beyond the Democrat and Republican dance, but we worked on international issues through the unions, such as boycotting apartheid South Africa. One time in the machine shop, one older guy who had previously been belligerent toward me on a political issue, adopted my stance in a different discussion with co-workers. Some people played devil's advocate to hear my arguments.

I loved proving to the guys that I could do my job, although sometimes I got tired of it. It seemed they were always watching to see if I would make a mistake, and sometimes I did, but I always got help when I asked. I remember being assigned to work with Jim so he could show me the ropes. Jim was a great teacher, and to this day his modeling of patience and clarity is something I aspire to, even in my English teaching. He was soft-spoken and had a wonderful laugh. Sometimes he would let me make the wrong cut so I could see it

wouldn't work and I learned to plan better.

There was a group of them I sometimes joined at the diner after work. At first I didn't know why they invited me. It didn't take me long to realize that they were not interested in me as person or in my politics, just in flirting or making fun of me. One night after second shift, when they found out through the rumor mill that I was gay, Jeb, the leader of the pack, leaned across the table and drawled: "Do you like to be finger-banged?" They all started laughing. I got up and walked out.

It was a long road to a better world and I was tired. Not only tired of the work itself, but tired of putting up with insults from men and driving points home as an activist. I needed a break, room to think, and a space for my creativity. I quit machining in 1991. I had left the Socialist Workers Party the year before. Life would take me to teaching and writing—my work today.



Kosovo Diary: June/July 1999

People are returning to their homes, lining up on the two lane road with possessions piled on cars and trucks, on backs, in sacks bound with rope and bursting. Over half the population of Kosovo had left because of the violence and war in this autonomous region of the former Yugoslavia, which is now splitting up. I am here to aid refugee women, as part of MOSAIC, an international women's organization I helped found. A British woman activist is getting us a place to live in Skopje where we landed. This capital of another republic of the former Yugoslavia—Macedonia—with its Byzantine and Ottoman buildings and even a fifth century fortress, is now overrun with UN soldiers, representatives of the Soros Foundation and other organizations. Several refugee camps surround the city, fields puffy with tents as far as the eye can see, a busyness the city is not used to.

Today, my first day here, we are going to Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, to help Igo's grandmother return to the home she abandoned there. We drive up to the border, where the long line of loaded pickup trucks and cars is at a standstill. We, along with others, are waved on because of some privilege. Igo doesn't explain. Some of the people on the line stare at our car with envy. While Igo is driving, her beautiful old grandmother, her skin weathered and lined, talks with her animatedly in Albanian. Lana, a young woman doctor and a Kosovar friend of theirs, is quiet, as am I.

As we come over a rise, the city of Pristina gleams on the dry hills, red roofs and sandstone buildings appearing like a mirage, clean and orderly from a distance. We arrive at Igo's grandmother's place and enter a war zone—homes demolished, piles of rocks, graffiti, a burnt smell in the warm air. We park in front and enter a ransacked mess—strewn belongings, dishes broken, photos torn to shreds. Everyone is speaking Albanian, so I don't understand what they're saying. Lana sometimes translates, but they are all busy with the disarray and calming the grandmother. Lana tells me she found Igo's laptop in the mayhem upstairs—that's why I heard her cry out. Igo's mother arrives, bringing us Turkish coffee. There is so much emotion in the air that I want to weep but I drink the coffee calmly.

Then we go back to the street. Rubble everywhere, a bulldozer. A woman named Zhaka rushes up to Igo and starts crying and hugging her. People walk around like zombies, some wanting to talk to us, tell us what happened. They notice an American and think it means help. Lana sees her aunt, and they hug and cry among dust and piles of rocks where houses used to stand. I have never seen such destruction. I can read some of the disgusting Serb graffiti calling the Albanians

scum and saying they'll return to "do it again and again"—unrepeatable curses in Serbian. I feel sickened by the inhumanity. Stories of children gassed, bombs planted, books burned—all because of territory Serbs assert that they own, based on a history that is long gone. People are lining up to get UN food from an old gray truck. How do they go on with their lives after such destruction? Pristina used to be "a bastion of peace and education," one of the activists in Skopje told me, as was Sarajevo once, I thought.

We go to nearby Vushtrri, where seventy percent of the city is destroyed. We visit with a friend of Lana's. Her husband tells a story of Serbs gathering some Albanian men, taking them to a school, and telling the schoolchildren to beat the them with sticks to humiliate them. I can't even imagine this, much less the other horrors I am told about. I learn that this city is the headquarters of the UCK (the Kosovo Liberation Army) and that is why it has been so devastated. Lana's boyfriend is part of the UCK I think, but it's not clear. People stop to tell us more stories. The nerves in my left arm are pounding as I find it more and more difficult to hear the translations. Lana asks if I'm okay. I shrug. She knows I arrived in Skopje with a case of shingles. The pain increases with stress.

Back in Pristina we go to a cafe. Under new laws instituted after 1989, Albanians were forbidden to speak their language, my friends explain. Books in Albanian were burned. Lana herself was denied the completion of her medical education because she was Albanian. As we drink coffee, a handsome young goateed filmmaker tells us about the master copies of his films being burned in the studio. One film told the story of a woman who was raped and then killed herself because her boyfriend rejected her. Another told of a man who looked for his father and found him in a mass grave. These were the horror stories the people had to live with.

The trip to inner Kosovo is making my shingles cut through my arm and shoulder like knives. It's hot, and I'm wearing a sleeveless top, and the rash is red and bumpy along my left arm. It showed up right before I came to Skopje. When I went to a doctor in Skopje upon my arrival, we communicated in Macedonian, which is close to Serbo-Croatian, my first language. He gave me a cream to relieve the pain and prescribed vitamin B12. I asked how much the visit cost and opened my wallet. He looked at me, shaking his head: "You came here to help. I can't take any money from you." He smiled and made a joke about Clinton. I thanked him and benefited from his advice.

Everywhere I go I see people rising up to the occasion to help each other. Amid all the destruction in the area, there is so much care, cooperation, and joy. I spend most of my time at the billowy tented refugee camp on the hill in Cegrane. The large stand-up tents fill a

field and hold more than one family each. The camp is down to about 5000 people. At its height, the U.N. reported it held "57,000 displaced and emotionally shattered people." They received humanitarian aid as they hid from the war and neighborhood gunfire.

As I walk around daily life seems organized and quiet. From the village below I hear the chanting of Muslim prayers. I am here with three other U.S. women in our group and we are invited into a tent by a woman who seats us on pillows and makes us some Turkish coffee at a gas burner. Her family's possessions are neatly folded in their section of the tent. There are mats for beds. How long can people live like this? They have nothing, yet they give strangers a cup of coffee? We offer sweets that we brought as presents. We show her our Albanian dictionary and point to words that she pronounces for us. I don't tell her I speak Serbian.

Our women's group does several workshops at the camp: one with teenagers on violence; another with women on advocacy and trauma; another with children on art therapy and on having fun. The situation must be so confusing and hurtful to people driven out of their homes, with destruction surrounding them and strangers descending from other countries. We keep hearing from young people about their strong desire for education. Albanian schools were closed in 1992 and many kids have not felt comfortable in schools where they don't teach in Albanian, so they stopped attending school. The kids enjoy playing bumper tag and doing an affirmation pyramid.

We go to the tents for a workshop started by Burbuqe, a young woman organizer who speaks English. It's a special group for the women who hold a regular crocheting circle. We join; they teach us. Fifty women in several shifts quietly and diligently participate. The older women wear dark kerchiefs, the younger women come with babies. One woman says she gave birth in the forest. A sleeping baby boy has an Albanian name that means Resistance. We learn lacework, a tradition in every ethnic group in Yugoslavia.

I look around at the women all busy with with their lacemaking, just being together. Two young women who wear the same top and similar necklaces sit very close to each other. Burbuqe's mother starts dancing at one point, and others join. They bow to us indicating they are happy we are there, inviting us to dance too. We give them gifts we have brought with us. An eleven-year-old boy who tries so hard to communicate with me in English gets my radio.

At the domestic violence workshop at Cegrane, my friend Sharon, a psychologist by profession, gives women trainees some simple lessons on how the young women at the camp can continue to work on trauma issues on their own and with others. When one of the trainees hears that Sharon is a psychology professor, she looks at her

eagerly: “Did we do alright?” Sharon smiles; “Of course.” My heart has been captured by these people who have experienced so much, the young people too wise for their age because of the war. My parents’ nationalities, whether I am Serb or Croat, is not a question for them—only the war divides. The extremists are the killers and perpetrators.

We have lunch the next day with Eve Ensler, author of the *Vagina Monologues*, who is visiting Cegrane. She asks us to tell her some of the stories we’ve heard and arranges interviews with some of the women. About ten of us sit in a temporary tent restaurant. The food is not the focus, of course. Eve leans forward to hear, attentive as a bird in danger. A narrative we heard at the lace workshop is about an old woman and her daughter who feel torn about leaving the animals behind when they have to flee their home. The mother is so worried about the cows being left tied up and in possible danger that she goes back to untie them. The daughter cries and says through tears that her mother never made it back—she was caught in a bomb explosion. There are minefields everywhere in Kosovo and throughout the former Yugoslavia as a result of this war.

Eve hears the story and wants more. We arrange for a translator to go around with her and talk to the women we met in the lacemaking circle especially. I see her perform this piece years later in San Francisco.

We go to other places—Tetovo at the foot of the mountain and sparkling Lake Ohrid. We hear how people want to preserve their Albanian culture and language. As we drive, we see the huge lake from the car, the silvery mosques and homes lining the shore. It is hard to believe such a fierce struggle is going on. In Struga, a town at one end of the lake, we meet with a women’s rights group to help them with organizational questions and international funding. In the workshop we bring up the idea of being and knowing yourselves. It is odd to the women; they have puzzled looks. Some of them are overworked, taking care of refugees, and going back and forth to Pristina. When we ask them what their dreams are and to visualize their futures, they are silent, maybe a translation problem or a culture clash or the war. Valdete volunteers that she never thinks of herself separately from her family. The art workshop, however, is appealing to them, something they can do with their hands. I think of how egotistically Americans are raised in comparison. Here community comes first—their family, clan, the Kosovo Albanians.

I am tired and want to go home. The shingles have pretty much disappeared—it has been three weeks. The communication in different languages tires me out, although I love learning about Albanians and their culture and spending time with the women as they teach me their names—Melihate, Shqipe, Ajnete, Nahine, Lovideta, Valdete.

Some are Muslim/Arabic names, they tell me. The discrimination against Albanian women is very serious, not only because of their ethnicity but because they are women. Nearby Tetovo, the unofficial capital of Kosovo Albanians, has the only university offering degrees in the Albanian language, but these are not recognized by the government of Macedonia. The scenery here is breathtaking but one can't enjoy tourism when talking to people about trauma and war. We go back to the Cegrane tents.

As we prepare to leave the camp, we dance outside the tents, like the Roma people. Igo leads us. Such beautiful energy and laughter. The children join us with their boundless glee. I have fallen in love with the little boy I gave my radio to at the workshop. We look at each other and he hugs my legs. I wrap my arm around his head. Hetema and the little baby called Resistance are in the crowd. I go up to the baby, we look at each other, and I kiss the top of his head.

How I want to see Hetema and her family again someday, Burbuqe who gave me a cherished book in Albanian, Igo with her incredible spirit, an Amazon sister, her love and comradeship so special! I don't have words for these beautiful people I have bonded with. They stand around us and sing about Kosovo and sprinkle us with water, the children clutching us as we try to walk away. "Don't forget us," shouts one young woman in English.

I don't forget.

South Africa: For Nelson Mandela

I had dreamed of this conversation when I was a young radical 25 years ago. I never thought I would go to South Africa, much less sit talking with a small community of black people who had to go to a spigot to collect their water.

Visiting our friend Susan, a white South African who had returned to her native Plettenberg Bay after the revolution triumphed and Nelson Mandela became president, we felt privileged to come with her to a township near the very tip of South Africa. While it was close to the most incredible vistas and scenery one could imagine, the people lived in dire poverty on a dry little hillside with one water source in lean-to shanties and huts.

We were late, and people had gathered to put on a little performance for us—some singing and dancing. It was a very sweet and celebratory show. I took photos, and the children watched and huddled around me. More people gathered on the outdoor stage, and I began videotaping. A girl of eight or nine year old brought a chair over to me and stood on it to see what I was videotaping.

People had done so much despite the slow pace of reform. Staff from the nearby city's community center had built that stage as a place for this township's people to meet and entertain. Townships grew up in South Africa as places attached to an urban center where non-whites could live. In a way they were holdovers from the old apartheid system, but they were getting a little more help now.

Susan's friend, Nokwezi, took us to the top of the hill and showed us the modest day-care center, which was a little hut they had just finished building. She talked about the support she had gotten for her project from the Black Fisherman's Association. The view from the hill was breathtaking. Not only could you see the whole township, but beyond the hills was the bright blue of the ocean. We were then led to the "best place" in the township for our meeting.

It was the home of Bukeka, the restaurant owner. How in the world did she ever get that huge entertainment unit into a shanty house? The room also held two couches, a large coffee table and several other chairs—arranged and furnished as if it were a home in Middle America. Susan came in with a basket of fish that had just been cooked and some glasses for beer. She said we must be special because this room was not used very much. We ate with our fingers and shared glasses. Mothudi, a Black man in his late thirties, began to speak about the struggle, the details of what happened in those days. He was imprisoned for communicating with Umkhonto we Sizwe, (the armed wing of the African National Congress) and remembered

running for his life and nearly dying in the process. He worked with different political factions, he said, and there were conflicts. Being a leader he spoke with a class perspective, describing the devastating claws of imperialism.

The room grew dark, and someone brought in a candle—there was no electricity. Mothudi talked a lot and seemed absorbed in the stories he was telling. I listened, amazed that I was there. I was only in South Africa because my partner Leslie wanted to come for her fortieth birthday. It had been a dream of hers. I never expected an experience like this.

I remembered, years earlier, bringing up resolutions at union meetings to boycott South Africa, demonstrating in favor of divestment, talking to people to build support, all to put pressure on the white regime to open the prison townships and to treat black people like human beings. Now here I was in the very country that had made a profound change—the elimination of apartheid. The anti-capitalist African National Congress overturned the old system and elected their great revolutionary leader Nelson Mandela as President of the formerly colonized South Africa. He was a man who had struggled in that very movement with his hands, his body, his mind and heart. I felt honored to be invited by Nokwezi, Bukeka, and by Susan who had cultivated a friendship with the townspeople.

Slightly hunched and wearing a cap, another man talked about prison, torture, betrayal. Hopes and dreams were destroyed and disappointment reigned. “My family was lost, killed. I don’t know how I survived. Now I have a new family.” He spoke of the dark days of apartheid, the thrill of the ANC victory, and the difficulties of constructing a new life today.

“We are here and they give us things but we are not on the same level as the city people. We are still a township with nothing. But we have Nelson Mandela. We have some dignity.” He talked and he needed us to listen.

Then Mothudi spoke again, about events in 1968 and 1970, noting that others outside Africa had helped “and we will never forget that.” He paused.

I rose, climbed over people’s legs, the coffee table, and stood opposite him. “Can I hug you?” And he nodded. Then a human thing happened. I hugged him and he stood there. I could feel him breathing, and my eyes filled with tears. The room was quiet as everyone watched us.

After I went back to my seat, others started talking. A dark man with his teeth missing and his hair sticking out in all directions, then Nokwezi’s husband, a sweet mild-mannered man, spoke. Bukeka and the young boy from the community center all took turns. I wondered

what Nokwezi, and the other women who were silent, thought about all that was said.

Talking, I had done so much talking about these injustices, this crime against humanity called apartheid. Now I just wanted to listen and take these people in. It was them, their lives and deeds and losses that mattered. This was love, this was humanity in its glory.

I felt that I had come home and was able to love those I had known remotely—the people in Soweto, the people in this little township, the people who were in Robben Island prison, including Nelson Mandela, and others who wrote books about those times.

Love was pouring out of everyone in the room. It was the simplest of human situations and the most complex. We were eating and talking now about a time when you could die and suffer and lose your children because you were black.

The likelihood of an activist from California being in this place near the very tip of South Africa was about as great as the likelihood of finding a needle in the solar system. Yet we were all on this earth together. The children had just been looking at my camera as I was filming, looking at themselves being filmed, laughing.

We were white, black, brown, from the U.S., from South Africa, even from Reunión, a French colony off the coast of Africa. We were different ages, different backgrounds, different sizes, with different privileges and sexual orientations. But we were there together and listening to each other with the greatest interest and love, with the greatest respect for each other. It was more than beautiful. I felt full of hope and longing.

The Rest is Poetry: Why We Come Out

In Buenos Aires, women sat in a circle called by an older woman, a writer and activist. In her sixties and just joyfully out as a lesbian, Ilse convened this gathering of women-loving women. She suggested that all of them write down stories of their loves, without signing their names. They did so. She collected the stories, shuffled them, and dealt them out again like a pack of cards. She asked one woman to read aloud the story she had been dealt. "I fell in love with the mother of my child's friend." There was quiet. Another read the story she had randomly received: "I went to church and confessed after kissing a girl the first time. Although I felt guilty I did it again, and I no longer confessed and stopped going to church altogether." Then another and another. The stories were so amazing and engaging. Spontaneously, one of the women, Amelia, proudly claimed hers was the one just read. More stories were read; more were claimed. In the end, all the women identified with their respective remarkable, beautiful, and fantastic stories.

The desire to make public what is most private is what moved me to collect and publish interviews of queers in Russia. Over a period of time in the 1990s I collected coming-out stories of men and women in Russia. Sometimes these interviews chronicled moments when individuals thought about their coming out as an event for the first time. Some interviewees felt transformed by the interview itself.

Making public what is feared and risking ridicule or castigation is a demanding undertaking—a decisive step in favor of life. For the interviewer and translator it involves even more—understanding words and intonations, working with people in the context of their own individual and national histories, making many choices about how to publish the material. Complicating matters are family problems, the politics of a country (repressive laws), differing cultural understandings (butch/femme or gender roles), and much more.

In the course of my work I shared some of my own writings and erotic poetry with Russians I met. In a sense I was coming out over and over with people there. I wanted them to experience this openness.

In Moscow, my friend Lena said to me one day in 1992, "It is puzzling to me that you feel the need to describe some of the most intimate details of sexual desire in your poetry. It doesn't seem like you are the one writing the poetry, it is as if the poetry comes from a different person." That person was indeed me, intimate details notwithstanding.

While Lena had been living with her woman partner for over

twenty years, it was difficult for her (and others) to identify in any way with the label lesbian. I got the feeling that they had never even uttered the word before I met them. Over time, as Lena became an activist, that changed.

Who is to judge whether reluctance to talk about one's sexuality is a genuine need for privacy or a form of internalized homophobia? In my explorations I am becoming aware of how slow and varied the process is. It is worth representing this aspect of human life in the history and customs of a people. Do I personally have a right to write about all this? Should I be publishing a book of interviews with people telling me about their most intimate stories and hidden lives? I felt it was they who took the step and gave me permission to make their stories public.

I have come to understand this question better during my incredible journey with my Russian friends. When I listen to them, I comprehend parts of my own sexual history and family and social dynamics. I too become more public. What is generally considered very private even in U.S. society is made public so that sexual minorities can be liberated. Gays and lesbians have been forced to be secretive about our sexuality to survive. To counteract homophobia, we reveal our same-sex orientation in our art and activism, in the way we dress, and finally in coming out. This is the beginning of our freedom. In the U.S., it reached full force in the 1970s and 1980s as a movement of pride and celebration.

In 1992, I was struck by Lena's observation, yet I didn't know if it was just another case of homophobia or simply that she had not read these kinds of details in poetry before. There was no gay movement in Russia. They had never been exposed to the wealth of literature and music that had been produced and unearthed by the queer movement in the U.S. It was all new to her, and it took time for her to take it in.

I remembered how fiercely I had to repress my sexuality as I grew up—my shame about the feelings, the glimmers of attraction to several girlfriends. They were much more intense than my feelings for boys. To my friend, Mary, I wrote impassioned letters in my preteen and early teen years, expressing "my care and concern for you, my confusion about what I feel, even my undying love." To my friend Celia, a little later, as a sixteen-year-old, I wrote a poem about a rose who wanted so much to be picked, the thorns were dangerous, the beauty precious.

At the time, I firmly pushed away any thought of physical closeness no matter how strong the urges. I didn't want to risk being rejected or sneered at. I had heard the word lesbian, and it was trampled on. I relegated the word to the bad pile, but what was so right about relating to boys? They didn't relate to me, and they

seemed to be a lot of trouble. Boys were aggressive, strange because of their odd sexual needs, and they didn't seem to be interested in me.

One of the first times I felt a real physical attraction for another girl was for Celia. She sometimes spent the night at my home in the Bronx. My mother would set up a separate cot alongside my own bed for her. Celia had just put on her nightgown and I felt very conscious of her body, her large frame, the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed several feet away from me. She was staring at me and I at her. She looked beautiful to me, because I loved her and our friendship felt good. Something very powerful—a sudden beam of light, the reverberation of a cello, the wash of an unexpected wave—passed between us. Our gazes became one gaze, as Shakespeare or another poet had noted centuries ago. Yet we were girls, the same sex, nothing good could come of these intense feelings.

I wanted to be close to her—physically. She asked me to hug her. I went to her, pushing the feeling of queerness away. I felt her chest move against mine. I wanted to hold her much longer, but I quashed my desire and we separated. I wonder what she thought as we went to our separate beds. I remember looking at her and finding yearning in her eyes, even in the half-light of my small room. In my bed I turned away from her gaze after saying goodnight. I turned away from her, fighting my desires, feeling exhausted.

It was not until the mid-seventies while on a trip to Soviet Russia, away from my husband, my family of origin, and U.S. society, that I felt drawn to a particular woman again. We were walking by the river in Narva, and questions of life and identity came up.

“Did you ever think about relating to a woman?” my new friend Gina asked, knowing I was married. I was so shocked I could barely answer her. Tears came to my eyes. I had already felt an attraction to her, but it was still unspeakable for me.

I began to free myself from the repression, this denial of my self. As we spoke from the heart about our lives and our observations, I felt a growing kinship with her and a trust in what I was feeling, an irresistible attraction I could no longer ignore or deny. That night, alone in a room we shared in Estonia, my feelings rose to the surface. As we continued to talk from our beds even after saying goodnight, I could no longer keep myself in check. There was no reason to, here in Estonia, far away from everything. I told myself that if Gina said one more word I would go to her. I did.

“I just want to hug you,” I pleaded. She blinked at me and after a moment took me in, encircling me with her arms. I embraced her, feeling a release I had never felt before. My breath was deep, as if I were blowing on a wind instrument. I felt her skin against mine, the smoothness of it, her smell, the softness of her breasts and my own—

unforgettable. I unlocked years of pent-up feelings. Dreams became possible.

I celebrated. The rest is poetry. Coming out is poetry.



Poetry by Kim

The Real Poem

Humans walked the earth tens of thousands of years ago,
A minority, in some places intermarrying with Neanderthals.
Animals were a majority then. Imagine huge hulky beings
And feathered dinosaurs, walking on ice. Few humans
Among them, inhabiting caves, drawing pictures of elk—
Of those sacred and powerful animals—yet not of each other.

Now obsessed with ourselves and our sad rule
Over Earth and the precious animals that remain, we
See some things people still don't believe would happen:
The mass extinction of marine life and major changes
In our environment due to self-destructive, civilized ways.

While debris from the Japan earthquake floats our way,
A log of fog winds plumply through Oakland hills.
I live in a home here with my bright partner Sue
and our two playful cats. We have a good life,
making the best of it, in the declining gasps of capitalism.

Emily Dickinson retreated writing truths—
But Mary Oliver pointed out:
“Maybe the world without us IS the real poem.”
And what about all our dreams, successes,
and a more socially conscious way of life? What
about learning and art and caring for each other?
Will we be changed beyond our control or will we
Fight to dominate till the end?

A cat sleeping
Inspires. His ways so simple. I lie in wait.

Part 3: Journeys and Interviews in Russia



*“All the best ones, when you thought
it over, were gay.”*

*Ernest Hemingway, For Whom
the Bell Tolls*

Revolutionary Romances

July 23, 1991, Leningrad. Opening day of Russia's first ever Lesbian and Gay Symposium and Film Festival. Last time I was here, fourteen years ago, I was another person, married but coming out, meeting my first love. Before I went to Russia in 1991, people had very little contact with anyone outside their country. It was a crime"punishable by prison to have contact with foreigners.

Emerging from a bus with seventy North American queers, eager to meet and show off to Russian novices who did not quite trust the new perestroika freedoms, I tried to make eye contact with one of the women standing outside smoking, but she looked away. Fifteen or more young men and a few women milled tentatively around the entrance of the House of Culture on Sophia Perovskaya Street. Some lurked with their backs half turned, unwilling to enter the white two-story building; others seemed ready to take off running. My heart was beating fast; I was nervous, too. Were they waiting for friends to take their big step with, or were they just cruising the Americans? Peter the Great's canal rippled a nod. I was here!

Exactly fourteen years ago, as a meek twenty-five-year-old married woman, I had joined a tour of Russia and found myself wandering around Leningrad, asking passersby for directions and wondering why they were ignoring me. At the time, Russians could not risk so much as talking to foreigners, could not risk even talking to foreigners on the street for fear of imprisonment or at least censure. Meeting my first love in Soviet Russia, in the summer of 1977, was revolutionary because any kind of openness, never mind about sexuality, was taboo. We were both foreigners so it wasn't the same for us. Even back then, in that hostile atmosphere, I knew there was no turning back to the traditional heterosexual lifestyle I had in California. I was forever indebted to Russia for my lesbian passage and my liberation. Russia was where I had the opportunity and courage to come out.

Now, in the summer of 1991, I was a veteran activist and a new Russia was blossoming. Soviet Leningrad would soon revert to its original name, St. Petersburg, and after decades of hiding and fear, the lives of sexual minorities in Russia would gradually become more public. Even so, the cameras hanging around our necks were ominous to those prospective participants at the entrance of the House of Culture. Making eye contact and talking could still have consequences. I watched my friend Alan approach a group of men. One of them waved his hand in front of the camera while the others turned away in unison, as if doing a dance routine. The whole atmosphere in

Leningrad seemed furtive and quiet; a smaller number of people attended our event. It was as if they were waiting to watch the reception in the capital, which was to come.

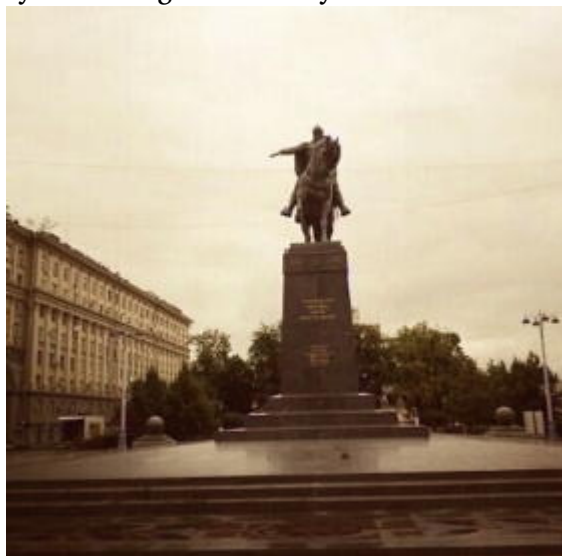
As we lingered outside, I explained to a group of our English-speaking delegates that *tematichesky* (thematic) was a code word for homosexual. Beginning in 1934, Stalin and others tried to wipe out homosexuality in the Soviet Union, on the heels of Hitler in Germany. Countless men, both gay and non-gay, had been subjected to the most deplorable humiliating treatment and prison conditions, over the past six decades. Women were also victimized often by forced psychiatric treatment. As a result of this campaign, most ordinary Russians believed that homosexuals were either criminals or mentally ill. In Russia, anyone could be prosecuted for all kinds of alleged offenses, such as hooliganism. With that kind of fear instilled in the population, it was a wonder anyone came out to the House of Culture for the festival opening.

Three days later we took the festival to Moscow where it was the biggest happening in the great capital. Thousands of Muscovites flocked to *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Desert Hearts*, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, *Maurice*, *November Moon*, and an early film of Gus Van Sant's, *Mala Noche*. Russian queers found themselves in the same line as movie buffs, taking the rare chance to see foreign films. While LGBTs and those curious about the life watched queer stories of heartbreak and struggle on the screen, the rest of the audience perhaps saw them as fantasies unrelated to their lives. Few Russians knew that one of their greatest and best known artists, the nineteenth century composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was gay.

The dearest friends I made during those two weeks were the six Siberians. Imagine traveling across the entire country at a time when it was abnormal to travel at all in Russia, except for official reasons. How did these young people trust that the event would even take place? Upon their arrival in Moscow for the first time, Asya and Lena and Olga from Novosibirsk, Natasha from Krasnoyarsk, and Benjamin and Aleksey from Barnaul consented to hold a press conference. Our activities were organized by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, a U.S. organization, with the help of gay and lesbian leaders in Moscow and Leningrad. The Russian government at the time was in transition so they were not interested in our actions. One of my favorite actions was the kiss-ins at the monument of Yury Dolgoruky, founder of Moscow. We planned ahead—which couples would kiss and drape the steps leading up to the monument. And the couples just made out right there in a group on the steps of the monument, in the middle of Moscow. At the forefront of the kiss-ins, Asya and Lena, together for about a year, came out publicly on

Moscow TV. reporters and American delegates.

Benjamin and Aleksey also shared their heretofore secret lives with reporters and American delegates. It was so brave to announce themselves as a couple, knowing the news would get back to Barnaul. In front of the Bolshoy Theater a few of us stood in various spots, giving out condoms to passersby who took them without hesitation and seemed quite interested. Benjamin said to me, "People don't even know what they are taking home. They love freebies." We laughed.



Yury Dolgoruky monument in Moscow

These were much more serious steps than any of the Americans could know. The media did report on some of the actions. "We didn't come here to hide under a chair," Natasha told the Moscow press. The Siberians risked losing their jobs when they returned home. Asya worried that her mother might try to institutionalize her. Contrary to her expectations, Natasha, a TV technician, received a supportive response from her coworkers at her job in Krasnoyarsk. When her supervisor tried to harass her, her coworkers protested and he backed off. Perusing photos Natasha had from the conference, one coworker remarked, "How can people with such beautiful sincere eyes be bad?"

Along with queer materials and our own stories and experiences to share with our new Russian friends, some of us took videos and recorded conversations. When I returned to San Francisco, the gay magazine, *The Advocate*, published my short profile of Olga Krause, the St. Petersburg singer and poet who attended the conference. Olga became a good friend and over the next years continued to sing, becoming a queer activist and author of books about her life as a

lesbian. I resolved to come back and travel through Russia to interview more sexual minorities, the term often used in Russia for LGBTs. Shortly after we returned home in August, there was a coup in Russia that ended up establishing Boris Yeltsin as president—a new democracy was beginning. For the next six years I continued to collect amazing stories.

My first interview was with blonde, blue-eyed Ira (pronounced EERA), a fast-talking, attractive young woman I met at the symposium. She was excited about talking into my mini tape recorder. When I came back to Moscow I visited her for a follow-up and met her girlfriend, Faya. It was their one year anniversary. Faya gave me a big smile. She was probably six feet tall or more, big-breasted, with medium-long brown hair and blue eyes. She seemed like a mush-ball, and was very affectionate with Ira. They both smoked.

Ira said they met right before the coup in July of 1991. Most people were trying to stay off the streets in Moscow those days because of random gunfire and big demonstrations. When Ira went over to the house of a mutual friend of theirs the day before the coup, Faya was staying there temporarily. Ira said she visited because she had heard this beautiful woman was at her friend's place. Hobbling around with a cast on her leg, Ira announced, "I came here to get married" and laughed. The other women who were present didn't know what to say. At first Faya was silent and a little put off by Ira's *naglost'* (abrasiveness). Watching her talk with the women there, she slowly made her way over to sit beside "her Ira," the life of the party. Faya studied Ira's face as she talked. That day Ira invited her to come home with her. Faya said no, but when Ira returned the next day, she changed her mind. They woke up to the roar of tanks, which they thought was construction work. It was the day of the coup.

We discussed the subject of coming out, a term Russians were starting to use because there was no equivalent in Russian. Another friend of theirs, Lyolya, said her mother was afraid for her because she had noticed her inclinations. Lyolya, only twenty, had been living with a woman named Natasha for three years. She said that her biggest problem was that Natasha didn't want to be out as a lesbian. None of their friends even knew they were a couple. When Lyolya and Natasha went on vacation to the Crimea with another friend and met up with Ira and Faya, Lyolya had known that they were lesbians. "Rather, I felt it first about Faya, but nothing was said until afterwards."

"How could you go on a vacation and keep your sexuality a secret?" I asked. "We're used to it," she said.

Ira died of a drug overdose the following year. I never saw her again.

When I came back to Moscow the next year to do some traveling and interviewing, I contacted Ksiusha, whom I'd met at the Moscow Symposium. We were sitting in Pushkin Square talking about my interview project, and she suggested we go to The Dacha. I shrugged. It had started to rain so I couldn't imagine going to the countryside so late and staying over in a house I didn't know without my toothbrush and contact lens case, but I decided to be flexible.

We went to Pobeda on the *elektrichka* (electric train) from the Kievsky train station. Little did I know that this journey would be one I would take often in the coming years. I opened myself to a world and friendships that continue to this day.

Lena and Sveta had been together for a long time but did not call themselves a lesbian couple. Natasha, a straight woman who "simply loved these people," was also there at the dacha, as were Sasha and Alex, a gay couple. Sveta, with the fun last name of Barabanova (drum), was originally from Ryazan, an ancient city south of Moscow. She and Lena had bought the old home, meant for a summer place, because Sveta was not registered (*propisana*) in Moscow and therefore couldn't reside there. Living outside Moscow within commuting distance was the next best thing. A lovely place to share with Lena and their friends, it became a gay meeting place.

Over tea that evening, Sveta and Lena told me how they met. Sveta began the story and set the scene in a school where they were both French teachers. Lena interrupted: "Sveta was waiting for her class to start, drinking tea, simultaneously reading and chatting with a friend."

Sveta smiled, her eyes twinkling: "It was the first time I met Lena—the dark-eyed woman." Lena asked her for the book she was reading.

Sveta: "What would you give me in return?"

Lena: "Nothing."

So Sveta refused to give her the book, saying, "Later when I went to her house I saw how many books she had." Lena laughed. Was it ironic that she wanted another one or that she would give nothing in return? I don't know. A Russian joke!

Lena continued the story and told how they became friends and then became attracted to one another.

Sveta: "I didn't feel funny about it at all."

Lena: "But we never wanted to become part of the lesbian social circuit—there is a kind of aggressiveness and self-assurance about them we didn't like. They were cliquish."

Lena and Sveta's devotion to each other became firmly established with another important event. When Lena applied to be a translator at the publishing company where Sveta worked, she had to

go in for an interview with the boss and bring her passport. With some trepidations—her passport clearly indicated that she was Jewish and anti-Semitism was institutionalized in Russia—Lena went into the office and sat down. She remembered handing the passport to the boss and watching his eyes as they went down the page and stopped at the identification of her mother as Jewish. He shook his head and gave back her passport. When Lena went out and told Sveta what happened, Sveta began crying and creating such a ruckus about the injustice to her friend that the boss hired Lena that very day. They both worked there for many years.

Our friendship grew and Lena and Sveta became mainstays through all my future work in Russia. They were key collaborators on producing my book of interviews in Russian, and simply family.

“We play women, but it is so obvious we are men.” I went to a performance of director Roman Viktyuk’s very popular *Sluzhanki* (*The Maids* by Genet) in Moscow and was able to interview Seryozha, one of the actors. Viktyuk was one of the more established artists who was clearly gay but “not really thought of that way.” Seryozha had been working at the Satirikon Theater on many productions over the years; he was also a choreographer. He was thrilled to work with the famous gay director and an all-male cast: “If women were to play the female roles, it might turn out a bit melodramatic,” he said, “but when men act them—the play can be understood on a more cosmic level—it’s about kindness, love, envy, good and evil.”

I asked Seryozha if he was openly gay. He shrugged, “Well, what can I say? People know. I don’t hide it. No one discusses it. I am happy with my work but I don’t have a lover right now.”

With men especially it was a serious step to be open, for they could be imprisoned for up to eight years if someone reported them, according to Article 121. This law had dominated the queer community since the 1930s when Stalin instituted it and men were routinely rounded up. Over the years thousands and thousands of men were imprisoned under Article 121. The effect was to make people extremely fearful and circumspect, hiding who they were and who they socialized with.

Seryozha said there were rumors that the government might get rid of the law or at least not use it much anymore in 1992, but “people are still afraid to tell the truth about themselves and their nature. They are still hiding, but it’s easier now. One time I did have an experience with the police. They questioned me and let me go. But it was much worse before.”

The tightrope queers walked in Russia highlighted how deep and treacherous the repression must have been. While the Moscow production of Genet’s *The Maids* was not considered gay, it was.

I could not take what people said to me in interviews at face value. There was so much history and culture involved and a strong legacy of repression to consider. I learned to listen with that in mind. Several transgender couples told me they wanted to become a traditional heterosexual couple so they could live better. One of my Russian friends explained, “Sonja, you must know why they want to do that. A woman can’t do anything in society here. Everything she tries to do, a man can do better.”

Gender identity was definitely in the mix of sexual minorities. In St Petersburg, I spoke to a beautiful young couple, butch-femme in my eyes. Dark, long-haired Natasha came smiling to our meeting in a pink crinoline dress with large polka dots and an open back. Her partner, Rem, looked more serious in a red T-shirt and jeans with blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. When I mentioned femme-butch roles in the U.S., Rem said it was not like that with her. Whether it was because of homophobia or the social denigration of women that Rem hated her body, the concept of gender and gender variance was there, even in intimate relations. “I wear my underwear when I have sex with Natasha so I won’t be conscious that I am a woman,” she told me, and then Natasha lovingly said she didn’t want her lover to “mutilate her body” to change her gender.

The intensity of the interview process was often overwhelming for some interviewees. After Natasha and Rem talked about their early feelings for each other, we took a little break because Natasha had started hyperventilating. Rem too was breathing hard, trying to smile as she said that it was so difficult to be recounting these details about their relationship openly to someone else. It was intense for me too, that people were choosing to reveal themselves to me.

In Moscow I met a transgender (female-to-male) train conductor in an army uniform and who used the male gender in Russian verbs. He thought of himself as male. I am not sure if he had had any operations or treatments yet, but he looked male and was short.

“I’d like to get my papers and work on trains going to Warsaw. I am a Muslim Tatar, and my mother left the family for a boyfriend. Sometimes I just don’t want to live. I just want to be with my wife. I don’t really want to hear about any of this [homosexuality, lesbians, the queer lifestyle]. People are not ready.”

I felt his discouragement and frustration. He also expressed misgivings about the interview and didn’t want any of what he said to be publicized. I was coming across a lot of that—people being open and then telling me not to publish what they said, or changing their minds about being interviewed. It was not an easy time. People were not sure about what perestroika and the new liberal media meant. Changes were happening very quickly.

Under the alias Max, the director of *The Creation of Adam*, not the first Russian film with homoerotic content but the first billed as a gay film, came to San Francisco from St. Petersburg to participate in the eighteenth San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in June 1994. When I was enlisted as Max's interpreter, the festival organizer wanted to know if Max was gay. People would ask him about this, so he should be prepared.

Tall, medium build, about forty, his thick salt and pepper hair cut short, Max looked sophisticated in black pants and a black silk shirt buttoned up to his neck. With his full beard, he could have been an artist from New York or Paris. He was a warm person, it didn't take him long to feel comfortable with me.

"Do I look all right?" he chattered on in his Petersburg accent. "I'm very nervous about all this. My film is showing at this festival! And I'm here in the United States! I never thought I'd ever come here! I wonder how it will be received. My son has seen my film and likes it. My wife is traveling in the United States too right now. She's a critic, invited by some university conference in Texas." Max was married, but that didn't mean he wasn't gay or bisexual, from what I knew of gay culture everywhere.

In San Francisco that night we were expected to attend the festival gala at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. As we walked from the Marriott, we talked excitedly like old friends, about the great Russian filmmakers Tarkovsky and Paradjanov, about St. Petersburg and where Max lived on the grand Nevsky Prospect, and other Russian subjects. Then I asked him pointblank, "Max, are you gay?"

He looked at me wide-eyed.

"Sorry," I said, "but you know people will be wondering. You're at a gay film festival, so it'll probably come up. Just preparing you."

"Sonyechka"—Max was already using an endearment for me—"I don't know what to tell you. I'm married, you know, and we don't talk about this in Russia. It's all new to me."

I said I understood—I'd been to Russia, "Maybe you'd like to say you're bisexual?" I was feeling silly. What did it matter, and why should I challenge his discreetness just because we were in America?

He flung up his hands, "I'll leave it up to you. I don't know what to do." Then, after a pause, "Oh, go ahead and say I'm gay."

Max told me he had a boyfriend he saw regularly, who was also married and had two children. I tried to picture Max's wife. When I asked what she thought of his gay relationship, he said, "We don't really talk about it. She goes about her life and I mine. She guesses, but we never talked about it."

Adam, the main character in his film, is married and discovers an

interest in men. Max raised his thick eyebrows and flung his hands up again. "I wanted to show the general public that homosexuals are regular people, that's all—that they are not perverts."

After many intriguing stories, experiences, and interviews in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Tomsk, the Crimea and other places, I was back in Moscow standing in line with my friend Ksiusha (who'd taken me to the dacha) at Primyera, a popular discotheque. A round *babushka* with gray hair pulled back in a bun collected the 20,000 rubles cover charge, about \$6.50 but quite a bit for a Russian at the time. I paid Ksiusha's way. Many more men than women were expected. Only a few people were there when we arrived at eleven p.m. The real fun would begin at midnight.

Metal tables with white tablecloths surrounded a large wooden dance floor and a raised platform to one side. Multicolored lights spun and flickered around the room. People sat in groups quietly drinking, not saying much to each other, serious, not smiling or flirting, waiting, perhaps, for the crowd to swell.

Prince, Madonna, and other good disco blared through the speakers. Three women sitting at a nearby table got up and playfully coaxed us to the dance floor. Shimmying up to me, a tall long-haired woman in a striped miniskirt and black tights danced around me like a go-go girl. Ksiusha nodded at me in approval and danced with the other two women, one revealing the top half of her voluptuous bosom. The dance ended, the women waved to us and moved back to their table. Where was the eye contact? I wanted to learn the signals, but I felt my obvious American look prevented me from fitting in.

A few minutes later, I leaned over to Ksiusha and asked if she thought there were a lot of heteros at the disco. She said, "Oh sure, there are all kinds of people here, but it's fine. They're not hurting anyone." I watched two male-female couples in leather, switching partners in all kinds of combinations. Apparently there was a freedom, a looseness, a letting-go they enjoyed among us.

"See that cute woman over there dancing?" Ksiusha whispered in my ear, "I slept with her. She's really fun to make out with." Later, in the middle of the dance floor, I saw the woman throw her arms thrown around Ksiusha's neck, as their mouths joined in a great passionate flow.

Arkady, a friend of Ksiusha's, sat at a table by himself most of the night, staring into oblivion. Once in a while he got up and came over to us to say hi. Ksiusha didn't invite him to join us. Arkady was tall and lanky, with stringy hair and a scruffy beard. Despite Ksiusha's rebuff, I noticed an easy affection among gays and lesbians, unlike the strict separatism in San Francisco. Arkady's blue eyes, slightly

effeminate intonation and deep, breathy voice were sexy. He didn't seem to be having any luck meeting anyone.

A woman in a long dress came around to check me out a few times. I dodged her because she wasn't my type. I must have seemed odd to her in my thick purple Patagonia sweater, jeans, and heavy hiking boots, which I was wearing because of the Moscow snow. With her typical spontaneity, Ksiusha had left me no time to get on the metro, go to where I was staying, and change into more disco-appropriate clothes.

Dagmar, a German woman who had been lovers with Ksiusha months earlier, swaggered over to me and asked where Ksiusha was. She said something in Russian about Ksiusha being upset with her. I pointed to our friend making out on the dance floor. She went up to her, said something, and then they went off together.

A while later I was ready to leave. I found Ksiusha at the three-friends' table, the ones who danced with us at the beginning, and asked if we could go now. She completely ignored me, poured herself a vodka, and downed it. "Just a few minutes, Sonja," she said curtly, and then disappeared again.

I went looking for Arkady. I marched around in my big boots like an uptight foreigner while Ksiusha was laughing and having fun on the dance floor. She came back to the table and collected her things as if to leave then she started kissing the two women sitting there. I started talking to Anya, the woman I had danced with earlier. I never found out if she was bi or a lesbian or what, but I didn't hesitate to tell her I was a *lesbianka* when she asked. Anya said she came to the disco every night it was open. Did she? I wondered. Then again, she seemed so familiar with everyone, and why would she lie? Ksiusha, who thought Anya was cute, now began inserting herself into the conversation and kissing her. Obviously drunk, Ksiusha ruffled her hair with a goofy grin on her face and finally headed downstairs to the coat check, then realized Arkady had her ticket, which meant another delay.

I found Arkady in a corner making out with a blond guy. My interruption about the coat check startled them. The blond guy must have thought I was some American dyke maniac in boots. Arkady came with me, leaving the guy in the corner after a few whispered words. In the cab going home to Ksiusha's, Arkady kept saying in his sexy voice, "If I had only had a few more minutes, I could have convinced him."

Taking the toilety-stink trap elevator to the fifth floor of Ksiusha's building, I tried not to breathe. It was such a relief to enter her cozy apartment. Clean sheets were awaiting us. I would sleep with Ksiusha and Arkady would sleep on the floor on some pillows. Sleeping in the

same bed was not sexual in Russia; it was pretty common. Arkady whined good-naturedly to me, “I’ll never forgive you for what you did.”

Ksiusha, glasses off and hair messy, was deep under the covers. As I joined her she looked up at me, smiling, and kissed me goodnight. I felt happy to be in a heavenly bed at last.

The next morning Arkady called his wife to tell her he was coming home.

“What does she say about your lifestyle?” I asked. I didn’t know he was married.

“She’s very religious,” he said, deadpan, “A saint.”

“She’s a lot older,” Ksiusha said, as if that was an explanation.

Traveling and meeting queers in various settings was fascinating. I resolved that the best way to convey something of what I learned in Russia was to collect interviews without interpretation, unfiltered by my own background and reactions to experiences in Russia, so in 2004 I published *Rozovye Flamingo: 10 Sibirskie Interv’yu (Pink Flamingos: Ten Siberian Interviews)*. While an American audience might have been more interested in a creative nonfiction book about Russian queers, I wanted to present the interviews on their own, as a documentary. To do this, I realized, the book had to be published in Russia, in the Russian language, and with the help of Russian editors—my friends at the dacha, Sveta, Lena and Vitya—so it was.



Friends in Red Square in 1991

Siberians: Two Interviews

Nadya and Lusya in Krasnoyarsk

Even in remote Siberia, people have lived gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered lives and survived.

Krasnoyarsk, a large industrial city of about a million people built around the Yenisey River, a day's train travel east of Novosibirsk, was closed to foreigners before perestroika because of defense and nuclear-related activity. While the winters could be extremely cold, there were conveniences like indoor heating and well-constructed apartment buildings, and there were beautiful summers to wait for.

My friend Natasha Ivanova, whom I had met in Moscow at Russia's first gay symposium and film festival in 1991 was hosting my stay in Krasnoyarsk. We stood on the bank of the Yenisey as she pointed out the Pillars on the opposite bank, column-like rock formations over two hundred feet tall. She had sent postcards of them to me in California. More remarkable than the Pillars themselves was standing with Natasha in her Siberian city about a year after I first met her in Moscow.

My interview project interested Natasha, as a TV journalist. She wanted me to meet two women who shared an apartment on the other side of the river. They had lived together as a couple for six years. We took the bus to a very run-down tenement-like cluster of buildings. A huge bulldozer stood idle in front of some closed shops between two buildings. We picked our way through piles of dirt and chunks of concrete along a worn path that led to one of the buildings. We went in and walked up a broad, cold stairwell with stained, pea-green walls.

Natasha knocked on a door. A slight woman with dyed blond hair opened it and smiled. Natasha introduced me to Nadya. The room was neat and clean, but the right side and the corners were piled high with boxes, clothes, and assorted stuff. Space and storage seemed to be at a premium in Russia, especially in the *obshchezhitie* (dormitory housing) like this. The left wall was lined with a set of bunk beds, and above them shelves with more boxes and more stuff.

"Lusya went to buy us something to drink," Nadya said. We sat down and began to talk. In the corner by the door, a curtain concealed their small kitchen area. It was hard to believe that two women and two children, who were with a friend during the interview, lived in a space slightly bigger than my bedroom in San Francisco.

Lusya walked in wearing a cap, looking as if she was just coming home from work. I knew she had a factory job. Both women worked

in a factory, which was how they managed to get their precious living space.

“I’m a trained nurse,” said Nadya, “but in order to get this place I had to take a job in the factory so we could all live together.” The *obshchezhitie* was a benefit that came with working at the factory. Russian young people often lived with their families well into middle age because of the housing shortage. Marriage gave one the right to a separate apartment from the state but sometimes a married couple had to wait ten years or more to actually get an apartment. Although there were cases of bribery and privilege, another option was to find a job that included housing, which was what they did.

Lusya and Nadya immediately began setting up for dinner. They brought out a folding table that took up most of the room, and all kinds of wonderful food made its way there—chicken, fried potatoes, cucumbers in sour cream, beets with *selyodka* (herring), eggs with sour cream, black and white bread. When it was all laid out, Lusya proudly put two small bottles of Pepsi on the table and glanced at me for approval. I knew she had gone out of her way to find them especially for my visit, so I oohed and aahed. Nadya’s job was obviously the cooking, and I complimented her. They seemed very much like a butch/femme couple. I was soon to have my first lesson about labeling people in Russia.

After tea, a wonderful torte, some candy, and some kind of boiled sweetened milk, Natasha said she would go for a walk and give us some time to speak alone. I was excited about my project and my first in-depth interviews in Russian. I took out my small tape recorder, but before I could turn it on, Nadya stopped me.

“Well, you see, I don’t know how to tell you this but we’re not lesbians. We’re not ashamed or anything, we just keep to ourselves, we just want to live together and be happy.”

I asked her to explain.

“You see I am a bisexual. I was married. I could be with either a man or a woman.”

I asked if she wanted to be with a man now.

“Oh, no. And Lusya is what we call here a transsexual. This is a person who wants to be the opposite sex, a person who dresses like and plays the role in the relationship of the opposite sex.”

I felt a bit protective of my own preconceived ideas and terms cultivated in San Francisco. On the other hand, here I was in Siberia in a society that had been quite closed and these women were telling me of their own identities. Wasn’t it the job of an interviewer to listen and to learn about people? I said of course I still wanted to interview them and assured them that some couples in the United States were like them. They smiled and seemed to relax. Lusya sat quietly as

Nadya began her story.

"I was married and had two children when I met Lusya. My daughter was an infant. I left my husband, and Lusya and I began living together any way we could. We stayed for a while with my family, then at another dormitory. That was six years ago. I never understood myself really. I just knew I felt happy when Lusya came to visit me. After some time I discovered that this was love and it was real and it had to be. I never doubted my feelings or thought this was wrong or bad or not normal. And this was my first experience with a woman. I never had these feelings in childhood."

Lusya sat at the table while Nadya spoke from the small couch. I was sitting on a chair between them, but Lusya seemed distant. I tried to draw her out. Did she have any girlfriends before Nadya?

"Yes, it's been difficult. I had a couple of girlfriends before. I had problems with one girl's mother who threatened me and told me to leave her daughter alone. And the other one's husband beat me up. So it's hard."

Nadya spoke fondly about her family, then added, "My mother doesn't know about me. My younger sister does; she comes over a lot. My older sister suspects it. We don't really talk about it. I never told anyone directly. My mother is old—I don't want to upset her. I just live my life."

I asked Lusya to tell me what she meant by transsexual.

"Well, lesbians, I believe, think of themselves as women above all. We have friends who are lesbians and another couple like us, one of whom is a transsexual. A transsexual is someone who takes on the role and behaviors of the man in the family."

"Just like I do the feminine things," Nadya said.

Lusya continued. "I've felt this way from childhood. I've always liked girls. I was ashamed to wear dresses. I just can't do what I don't want to do, whether people understand it or not. Now, I choose a job where women can wear pants. I actually like manual labor. At one time I wanted to have an operation—a year ago—but I've been talked out of it. There's no guarantee everything will turn out okay, and I didn't want to take the chance."

Later she showed me pictures of herself on a motorcycle, looking casual and proud in her shiny leather jacket. She used to be in a motorcycle club and even competed, but that was some years back. Nadya showed me a photo of the two of them with her son and daughter shortly after they first began living together.

"One of our biggest concerns is that the children understand that this is okay. I am very careful to point out that Lusya is their auntie, not Papa as my little girl sometimes calls her. I don't want them to be confused about gender. My son has already asked why Auntie Lusya is

living with us.”

I asked them if they had the privacy to make love. Lusya shook her head:

We try to wait until they are fast asleep because they sleep in the bed right under us. We don't even hug in front of them. We try not to show our feelings in front of them so there won't be any problems. We don't have any problems with our relationship. Our biggest problem is raising the children and feeding them.” She laughed.

“Well, there is jealousy sometimes,” said Nadya, looking at Lusya.

“Yeah, it happens,” she admitted.

I asked them if they felt any pride about who they were and how they lived. I think the question struck them as a bit odd. The questions I had about identity and gender were not questions they had thought much about or seen discussed in the media, but Nadya responded anyway.

“I am proud because I feel that I live a happier life than a lot of other women. I live with a wonderful woman who loves me and whom I love, I have a home I am happy in, I am happy sexually.”

Lusya spoke with more restraint. “I would like to have a calmer life. I come across confrontations every day. People harass me, ask ‘Who are you?’ I am afraid of violence from people in the street—you just never know. But I can't do anything about all this. I've attempted suicide a few times in the past. Sometimes it can be very difficult. But I don't have any secrets. I just do what I want.”

Nadya talked about how they explain their relationship to coworkers and friends.

“We just say we're sisters. [The word for “sister” also means cousin.] Sometimes people ask, ‘Why does your sister look so strange?’ I just tell them she's an athlete.”

We laughed.

“But we really don't have a lot of time to socialize between our jobs and the housework.”

I took pictures of them with their cat, who reminded me of my own. They were really happy that I had come to visit them. I marveled at their courage and devotion. I too was happy I'd met them and I wished I could spend more time with them. Natasha came back from her walk and Nadya went out with us as far as the bulldozer. Nadya's son came running toward her as we crossed the street. She hugged him lovingly as she waved to us.

Sveta in Novosibirsk

There is much more to Siberia than snow and prison camps.

Farley Mowat in his book *The Siberians* portrayed this area of the country as much friendlier than the central big cities. He wrote about people who had settled in Siberia after being sent there to the gulag and about the children of those people. It is hard to imagine a country where prison camps were such a huge part of life. Prisoners in the gulag had often committed only the smallest mistakes or merely spoken ill of Stalin; others were sent there for political reasons or because the government wanted to make a point.

Novosibirsk, where I often based myself when I was in Siberia, happens to be the third largest city in Russia but was considered "*provinciya*," because it was outside of Petersburg and Moscow I was surprised that even in the "provinces," finding people willing to talk to me about being queer was not difficult. Even the mother of one of the women I met on the train trip to Moscow was eager to tell me about the support she felt for her daughter's lifestyle: "I raised my daughter to be independent."

During my visit with my courageous young friends, who I had first met in Moscow in 1991, Lena and Olga and Asya read me parts of letters they received as a result of interviews and articles about them that appeared in the newspapers following the symposium and film festival in Moscow. The letter writers' yearnings to reveal the deepest, most secret part of themselves came through strongly in the letters. These letters expressed the very soul of the movement of sexual minorities in Russia. A disabled woman wrote, "When I read the article about you in the newspapers, my shoulders straightened and I felt proud. I desperately want to live and love." Another woman said she had been with a woman once before and had "tried" men. "I read the article in the newspaper. I thought a long time and decided to write. You get tired of keeping everything to yourself and living a double life..."

When I returned to Novosibirsk after my visit to Krasnoyarsk, I was very interested in meeting Sveta G. who I'd heard had passed as a man for three years in order to live with her girlfriend. They'd even gotten married. Lena said she would try to arrange the interview but warned me that Sveta was hesitant to talk. She finally agreed to meet with me at Olga's apartment, where I was staying.

Accompanied by her friend Natasha, Sveta turned up at the door looking like a gang girl in her Olympia T-shirt and a baseball cap with a motorcycle on it, the bill backwards. She was wearing jeans, a status symbol at the time. In her early twenties, she had piercing blue eyes and wavy blond hair cascading around her face.

In an effort to break the ice, I began by asking some questions about her family and work. She said she lived with her parents in Pashino, a small town on the outskirts of Novosibirsk and was an only

child. Her parents both worked in a factory but she herself did not have a job right now.

“I love photography,” she said when I attempted to steer the conversation toward her relationship with her girlfriend, Elena, which had ended less than a year ago and was no doubt still painful to her. Finally she began to open up, telling me that Elena was her first relationship and that they’d met in the park in central Novosibirsk and fallen in love.

“We lived together like a man and a woman for the world but not with each other. She was probably bisexual, but we loved each other a lot. I miss her very much. I tried to find another girlfriend, but I couldn’t. What was once cannot happen again. And I don’t want anything else, so it’s better to just be alone. Maybe sometime I’ll find a girlfriend, but not now.”

She fell silent, looking sad. I changed the subject. I asked what she thought of our mutual friends, Asya, Lena, and Olga, the first open lesbian activists in Novosibirsk. Sveta had met them by writing a letter to an address they provided in their newspaper interview.

“I really like what they’re doing, it’s great that they have brought us all together. We didn’t know each other at all. Now we have the possibility to be open with each other at least. Everything they are doing is right.”

Natasha had been silent. Her hair was also blond but long and neatly clasped in the back. She too wore jeans, and a beautiful blouse with colorful swirls. Her eyes were brown and unlike Sveta, who looked down most of the time, she had been watching me intently. Wanting to include Natasha, I asked when they each had their first sexual experience with a girl. Sveta didn’t seem to want to answer, but Natasha did.

“At fifteen. I had close girlfriends, with some I was closer. Then we would argue and get jealous and it would feel like more than girlfriends. Then with some there was sex. Everything seemed okay. I found out I was lesbian because I was always falling in love with my female teachers, my girlfriends, and then with a singer.

“After high school I went to a technical school,” Natasha continued, “and there I met some girls, and one came to me to spend the night. We had sex, and after that the girl fell in love with me. At the same time she had boyfriends, she was probably bisexual. Then she got married, and she doesn’t need women at all now. The girl felt that what we did was a perversion, and I was hurt.

“I have a girlfriend now, her name is Irena. We argue a lot. She has a man. And when I saw the article in the *Siberian News*, I wrote to the girls [Asya, Lena, and Olga] and asked them to help me find a girlfriend.

“I didn’t understand at the beginning why I was in love with my girlfriends, why I was jealous. I didn’t think I was a lesbian because I thought lesbians were in prison, that they were fallen women, corrupt women. Therefore I didn’t relate to them.”

Addressing Sveta, I asked if she considered lesbian a negative word.

“No, I don’t, but different people think differently. Some people are interested in us, some hate us. I have a heterosexual girlfriend and she knows everything about me. She seems to understand me. She even asks me what I do about sex, and I tell her.”

I asked Sveta and Natasha if they talked to each other about sex, as friends. They both said yes, looked at each other, and then giggled. I asked Natasha if her mother knew about her.

“Mama was shocked at first, and then she calmed down. I do have a separate room where I can be with my girlfriend. And now my parents go away a lot to their country cottage and they’re not home for days at a time. I like to have parties.”

“What do you do for a living, Natasha?”

“I speculate [buy products and sell them at higher prices]. I have a lot of friends. There’s a heterosexual guy I work with who knows about me and still relates to me well. Everything’s fine.”

I asked Sveta, since she passed as a man did she ever want to go through an operation and change her gender?

“No I didn’t. At home with Elena everything was normal. As soon as I went out the door I became a man. While we were home everything was good. Between ourselves we related normally. It was very hard to play the role of a man outside. All the time I feared revealing myself. I didn’t want to give myself away. In summer it’s hot, and people wear T-shirts and go swimming in the river. I had to keep a sweatshirt on so my breasts couldn’t be seen. This was not easy—to play the role of a man.”

She got quiet. I remarked that it must indeed have been difficult for her and Elena at times.

“Yes, but we survived. It was hard because at first [before they got married] neither of our parents knew we were living together. I had to lie to my mother and say I was staying at a girlfriend’s. At the time Elena was taking classes in Novosibirsk, finishing technical school. Her parents knew she was in Novosibirsk. It was hard, yes. Economically, because neither her parents nor mine helped us. And because we were young and foolish.

“Then we moved over to the village, where Elena’s parents were living. At first we lived with them, in our own room, but then we got our own apartment at her grandmother’s place. It was a small village, and people liked to gossip. We didn’t want any gossip, so I hid the fact

that I was a girl. We could not be without each other. For three years we were never apart. I walked her places, met her after work, and walked her home. It was oppressive, though. We were afraid people would find out. We broke up because of that. We were afraid her parents would find out and there would be a huge scandal. We began to argue. Before that we never argued, ever.

"It's my fault that we broke up. If I could have been firm, strong, this wouldn't have happened. She, she's a soft, tender person. She needed a strong person, strong-willed, someone to lean on. And I myself am just a woman. I can't give her what a man could give her. She wanted children. I don't know, I can't even explain what. I myself wasn't missing anything with her."

I asked how the man Elena was currently with came into the picture.

"I was in Novosibirsk looking for a job for a month, and while I was gone he showed up. He knew that Lena was by herself, he knew her from before, and he came to be with her. He thought I was a guy and when I left he came to be with her. They made up and started seeing each other.

"When I got back, I walked into the apartment and immediately knew a man was living there. When she came home, we didn't fight, there were no explanations, we even smiled at each other. We left each other quietly. We separated as friends. It was of course very hard for me, but why put up a fight? We haven't had any contact since then. She lives with him and I am here alone. I don't think she will get rid of him. I consider myself a lesbian but she does not, she is just a straight woman, a heterosexual. She didn't even have sex with a man before, I was her first sexual experience. It is natural that she would fall in love with me."

Suddenly Sveta said she had to leave, and we parted. I wondered if the interview was just too emotional for her.

A month later I met with Sveta once again. We sat under a tree in the park at the center of Novosibirsk. She wore a different cap, this time with the bill forward. Natasha had come with her, but she sat with our friends on a park bench farther off.

Sveta still seemed shy. She handed me four photos and said they were the only ones she had of her ex-girlfriend. One photo especially struck me. It was their wedding day (it was basically illegal—they were faking a marriage), and they were sitting at a table. Sveta was smiling as her girlfriend planted a kiss on her cheek. If I hadn't known otherwise, they were a typical young heterosexual couple.

In the photo, Sveta is sporting a tuxedo, a white shirt and a bow tie, smiling in delight. Her hair is shorter but has the same waves, the look unmistakably hers, a devilishness in pulling off the wedding. Her

young wife—both of them in their early twenties—looks at her in admiration, her profile sharp but pretty. The black and white photo doesn't reveal the color of her dress.

Sveta was more relaxed with me this time. I had decided to be bold in my interviews, but sometimes the questions were a little too much for the interviewees. When I asked her if she could tell me something about her and Elena's sex life, she was taken aback and said it was too intimate a question, so I asked more about their life together and passing as a man.



“For me all this, my relationship with Elena and being interested in girls, was natural. Those feelings were not repressed or oppressive to me. I think about her a lot. We were very much in love. But we never talked about being lesbians. Everything was accepted the way it was. We lived like man and wife.

“The most difficult part about trying to make people think I was a man was being with the men. I had to be careful about using masculine endings in the first person all the time when I spoke about myself. And you know, you have to drink and smoke and act like them. I helped some guy fix a motorcycle once. They aren't shy about themselves or with each other. They said all kinds of things to me, personal things. Of course, they didn't know I was a girl. I remember it was hot once and all the men were taking off their shirts, but I couldn't.

“And my mother, although she had guessed something like this was going on, when she learned about what I did, she thought it was awful. She saw my pictures. She thought I was playing a joke. And Elena—it was all her idea to live as man and woman so we could be together. We were together for three years, never apart.

“Anyway we had a wedding for her parents' benefit too—there were a hundred people at her place in the village. We couldn't be together if we were living as two women—we wouldn't be considered a family, a couple. Her relatives gave us a double bed for our

apartment. We loved each other a lot, everyone would have noticed if we lived as two girlfriends.

“Then, when I left to go see my mother after not seeing her for a long time and I went back to her again, I sensed that she was with a man. When she came home we just cried. She told me not to write, call, or come anymore. She probably misses me, but she’s with a man now. They can have children and a regular family. No one will say anything, she doesn’t have to hide. She still loves me, I think, she must be bisexual.

“I never wanted to be a man. I think transsexuals must be very unhappy people. But I think it’s actually easier to be a man than a woman in life.

“After my break with Elena it was so hard at first, but now I’ve gotten used to it. I don’t have a girlfriend now. I am alone and I have nothing to fear. I don’t even want to look for a girlfriend.

“The thing that has helped me all this time is my photography. It’s the only thing I love, it’s my lesbian life now. When I have a hard time I stay in my room, I develop some pictures or think of a new idea. I’m not always able to develop and print things because of costs, and I don’t have everything I need.

“I would love to photograph a beautiful woman. And do more photos on our tema [theme]. I thought of some still-life photos I could do—two glasses and two women reflected in the glasses, or cassettes with triangles on them, or a bed that had been slept in, with two pairs of women’s underwear flung on it.

“I’m frustrated that I can’t make large prints and show them to everyone. I’m always afraid my mother will see my work. I don’t want my mother to know about my lifestyle. I would be ashamed to look her in the face. She thinks I was just being bad when I went off with Lena, that I did it to be mischievous. She says I’ve always been that way. I don’t think it was a very good thing for me to live a lie like that and to fool all those people.”

I thanked her for talking with me again and gave her back the photos. She handed me the one I liked of her and her girlfriend at their wedding and said, “For you, a gift.” I shook my head and told her I couldn’t accept it knowing how she valued these few pictures of Elena, but in true Russian style she insisted, and I gratefully accepted.

We went out for ice cream afterward with our friends, to a cafe in central Novosibirsk popular with young people. Disco music blared in the background. Sveta wore her cap and walked with a butch swagger. Her light blue eyes sparkled as she mumbled, “Those people over there think I’m a guy.” She laughed and ate her ice cream, delighted at her little trick.

During perestroika Russians came out of a lifetime of intense repression. Sex had never been discussed publicly during the Stalin years and after. In the 1990s suddenly even pornography made a debut on a large scale. Deprived of information and a modern way of life, many gay Russians struggled to adopt Western attitudes toward sex wholesale, rather than evolve their own tradition. They loved the books and magazines and films we brought over, because they had not had the opportunity for more than sixty years to develop their own. That was why it seemed that queer culture was being imported. In fact, Russian queers did have a culture of their own, but it was secretive and hidden and coded. Even after perestroika, because of the strong influence of the church and the government, the new openly queer movement had to battle extreme homophobic attitudes.

I found the average person to be very private about his or her sexuality, but actually the privacy was a form of the intense secrecy people developed in the Soviet Union to keep themselves safe from the watchful eye of the ubiquitous state and a possible prison sentence. This was a real fear among gay people.

In the United States, we have a need to define our sexuality as part of a political struggle for our rights. The fight for women's rights and the black civil rights movement gave birth to a lesbian and gay movement. In my youth, U.S. lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people established their identities as a way to embrace their orientations and genders. This need changed as our rights and lives became more secure. Having a sexual identity was a strange concept to the Russians I interviewed in the 1990s. One woman I met, the partner of an open lesbian activist, told me she was offended when someone asked her about her sexuality: "It's a very personal question."

The gender question came up quite often in interviews. Another Russian friend told me she felt that she was a he but did not want to leave the safe lap of the lesbian world. Being considered a man who was responsible for women's oppression was not something she could imagine for herself. She often got pounding headaches from being a woman in the world, physically ill, yet she did not go through gender reassignment. The thought of being a man—the source of the oppression of women, the idea of becoming a burly macho homophobic jerk did not interest her, as she said. The world was so complicated.

In Russia, the words "homosexual" and "lesbian" were associated with prison life and had a criminal aura. Public attitudes began to change in the 1990s with more access to news from the West and more discussion of sexual minorities in the media. Falling in love was not about gender, a few interviewees said, but on the other hand some wanted to pass as male in order to be in a relationship. Were the

secondary status of women and the obvious opportunities for men driving forces for them? Was a change in gender a way to pass in society, that is, a way to have same sex relationships? The transgender issue is very complex in Russia and has its own history. If I learned anything from Russian gays and lesbians, it was how deeply sexuality was situated in the context of a culture. It was not something you could generalize about across cultures.

I am back in Novosibirsk, at its one and only lesbian bar, on the banks of the Ob River. Teresa, the owner, greets me warmly and asks me to say a few words about my book of interviews, *Pink Flamingos*, which has just been published. I present her with a big rainbow flag I've brought for her to hang in her bar, a major meeting place for lesbians in Novosibirsk by now.

"Someone wants to talk to you," Teresa says, pointing down the counter to a woman drinking a beer. It's Sveta, whom I haven't seen since I interviewed her eight years earlier. I'd tried to remain in contact, but she was nowhere to be found.

She looks at me almost angrily as I greet her. The old warmth and playfulness are not there. Sveta brings up the interviews and my publishing the book. I assure her I did not use her name or even that she was from Novosibirsk, as we agreed in the last communication. Like a rejected lover, I am sad that she's so hostile. I go back to my friends, and we dance and have a good time. I catch Sveta staring at me from the bar from time to time.

The place is packed with women, loud music pounding through our bodies, smoke hanging heavily. Teresa quiets everyone to make an announcement from the stage. She introduces me and holds up my book. "Here is our American friend Sonja Franeta! And here is *Pink Flamingos*. She has given us this rainbow flag for our Novosibirsk Club," Teresa says, unfurling the flag. People clap and cheer and go on drinking. I notice Sveta still staring at me from the bar as I say something about the book to the crowd in Russian.

When I pass near her again later, she is in an animated discussion with another butch at the counter. She looks away to avoid contact, aware of all that is going on around her. I want to thank her for being part of the book and just connect. I go up to her in my direct American way, and she turns away from her friends to listen. I ask how she'd been doing and we exchange small talk.

A story she told me during our interview about passing as a man flashes through my mind. She was working in an auto shop and would wear a T-shirt to conceal her bound breasts, small to begin with. The men in the shop where she worked would take off their dirty T-shirts in the heat of summer and bluster about. She worried about the

pressure to take hers off but never did. That was eight years ago.

“We lived as man and wife for three years,” Sveta said proudly then. She loved being married to Elena. “Everything was normal” between them—that is—in the privacy of their home, they were two women living together. They did not pass as male and female in their home, they were a lesbian couple.

A couple of years after our encounter in that bar and not far from it, Sveta was killed in a fight over a femme. It was a cold winter night, and there was some sort of gathering at this femme’s house. She had two suitors, Sveta and Fila. Fila wanted Sveta to come outside and fight over the girl. Sveta didn’t want any part of it. Fila was twenty five and almost ten years younger than Sveta. When the party was ending, Sveta left with a couple of other friends; other women accompanied Fila to the street in a kind of gang arrangement. Fila picked a fight. Sveta threw her down and punched her. Then Fila took out a knife and jabbed Sveta in the stomach. Sveta rolled over, and Fila ran off. Apparently she hit an artery, for even though the ambulance arrived soon after, Sveta died on the way to the hospital. My friend Lena told me this story and she got it from a someone who was present. There was a trial, and Fila was sentenced to prison for about ten years. All this, over a girl! Lesbians acting like men? Like in the movies? Lives ruined?

Of course, Sveta’s mother and friends were heartbroken. I was heartbroken upon hearing this terrible story. I think of her smiling face and her fascination with meeting an American lesbian writer for an interview, and then her scowling resistance to being in print. It was a sad end. Sveta’s story is not only a part of our queer collective history but a revelation of how homophobia can twist and extinguish a beautiful desire.

The lesbian bar was closed soon after, because of this and other brawls. Teresa was tired of the problems. She knew Sveta and the others personally and didn’t want more women to be hurt.

Amazon Sisters on the Trans-Siberian Railroad

A lifelong dream of mine was to travel across Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. My sense of romance, my Slavic heritage, my studies in Russian literature, my left leanings—all pointed me in that direction. I yearned to cross one of the most enigmatic countries in the world and experience its expanse firsthand.

In the summer of 1991, I was lucky to have been a delegate at the Gay and Lesbian Symposium and Film Festival in Moscow and St. Petersburg, a first for Russia. Home in San Francisco I returned with phone numbers and invitations to return to Russia for another visit.

I wrote about my Trans-Siberia idea to Asya and Lena, whom I had met at the festival. They had traversed half the country from Novosibirsk in Central Siberia, and were stars at the symposium, which had turned into a coming out event. Being from another city, they felt more comfortable speaking to the press and posing for photographers at the kiss-in. Back home they continued giving interviews to the press, and they set up a post office box for queers wanting to correspond with each other. They were enthusiastic about their fledgling activism.

I called Asya and Lena before I left San Francisco. I had decided to fly to Khabarovsk and start at the eastern end of enormous Russia, make a stop in Novosibirsk, then continue on to Moscow. Lena's mother answered the phone in Novosibirsk and told me her daughter was not home, adding, "The girls (*djevushki*) are planning to meet you in Khabarovsk and travel back here with you." I was stunned.

"No, no. It's a journey of over 3000 miles from Novosibirsk," I protested, "That's really not necessary." Imagine going from San Francisco to New York to meet someone in order to accompany them back to San Francisco! I could take care of myself, I thought. But the American independent spirit was not something the Russians were familiar with.

"No, no, don't worry," Lena's mother assured me, "they're already planning on it, it's not a problem."

Lena and Asya, both in their early twenties, stood in line at the *vokzal* (railroad station) and bought an entire compartment with four berths to Novosibirsk on a regular passenger train, not the express. First class was not available on this particular train. First class is two-berths ("soft class" in Russian), second class was the one we were in, the common or *kupe*, with four berths, then there is third-class, *platskart*, which is open berths, no closed compartment. Fourth class is

bare benches.

Foreigners often arrange trips on the Trans-Siberian through travel agencies in the United States and are separated into special first-class cars for foreigners. Non-Russians pay much more than Russian citizens for hotels and travel. I didn't have to show my passport on boarding the train and got away with buying my ticket for rubles, which was much cheaper. In May of 1992, we paid 350 rubles each, about three dollars, for the entire trip to Novosibirsk (5,200 kilometers, ninety-seven hours on the train).

The Trans-Siberian Railroad is the longest continuous track in the world. Our starting point, Khabarovsk, built on the banks of the Amur River, is more than a century old. This eastern Siberian city is the main air junction for Russia's Far East. From Khabarovsk, one can go south to Nakhodka and Vladivostok or west to Lake Baikal, Novosibirsk, or Moscow by train. After Tsar Alexander the III authorized it in 1886, it took thirty years to build the railway. In 1916, the year before the October Revolution, it became possible to cross two entire continents from the English Channel to the Pacific Ocean by train.

I rocked to the clicking sounds and gave myself over to the movement. Lena and Asya sat opposite me on the maroon fake leather berth. We smiled and gazed out the window. They were a beautiful couple—Asya with short dark brown hair and dark eyes, Lena with permed blond hair and hazel eyes. They were often touching or hugging. I enjoyed their intimacy.

Ice was thawing, and green marshland filtered the running rivulets rushing to join a river. Siberia has 53,000 rivers; the main three—the Ob, the Yenisey and the Lena—flow north into the Arctic Ocean. The Amur River, which we were crossing, flows into the Pacific. I thought of how water could carve land, widening rivers, creating lakes, mud, and marsh. I had left San Francisco in the midst of a drought.

Green meadows sparkled in the spring sun. It was downright warm in May in Siberia, yet Americans have an image of Siberia as a land of permanent ice and snow. *Taiga*—dense forests of spruce, birch, and ribbons of pines from afar—wound across the flat or sometimes rolling landscape. The tundra was farther north and dominated by permafrost or frozen mud. I had heard about the Kamchatka Peninsula. I imagined it to be similar to the California coast but barren, with active volcanoes and miles of majestic coastal views.

My thoughts went to Boris Pasternak's masterpiece, *Doctor Zhivago*:

Through the opening in the window they could see the

country covered with spring floods as far as the eye could reach. Somewhere a river had overflowed its banks and the water had come right up to the embankment. In the foreshortened view from the bunk it looked as if the train were actually gliding on the water.

The train was a veritable character in this novel about survival in Soviet Russia after the Revolution. I recalled the meditative rides, the adventures, the political intrigues, romantic longing, the snowy steppes. For many Americans, *Doctor Zhivago*, the film and the book (first published in 1958), was their only picture of life in the USSR during that period.

As soon as the train quit lurching forward and found its rhythm, Lena set to work arranging our little *kupe*. She found a rag, wet it, and cleaned all the areas we would be contacting—the cheap vinyl headrests above our berths, the table, the doorknobs. “This train is a lot cleaner than the one we took to get here,” she said, shaking her head. We struggled to set my luggage under the bunks and took out the things I would need—my book, toiletries, a sweater, some snacks.

The conductor (*provodnitsa*), a large woman in a navy blue uniform, with dyed dark red hair and thick eyebrows, suddenly appeared at our doorway with a bored look on her face, holding a pile of clean linens and muttering something. Lena paid her and then began making up our bunks, as if she were at work at the hospital. She was a nurse by profession. Telling stories about work, she complained of poor working conditions in hospitals in Russia. “I feel so terrible when patients ask me for medicines or even help that I can’t give them,” Lena said. “Not only do we have to sterilize and reuse needles and other equipment that would normally be disposed of, but we don’t have adequate supplies of towels and sheets and sometimes have to patch them to make do.”

To get out of Lena’s way, Asya and I stood in the corridor. Lena pointed down to the other end of the car. Tea was supposedly available, but the *provodnik* (male) or *provodnitsa* (female) would decide when. The massive samovar in each car was heated by coal and had to be tended by each car’s conductor—something she or he didn’t always feel like doing. Later that year on another trip, when I became frustrated waiting for service, I crossed into the next car. A young woman looked me up and down suspiciously and said, “And which car do you belong in?” as if I had crossed some forbidden border. “The next one,” I pushed past her to get my water and left before she could complain further. That was after I learned how to be rude.

Men in army uniforms passed close to Asya and me in the corridor. “We may be the only women in the entire car,” Asya

remarked, checking my reaction. I told her I had taken self-defense classes before leaving San Francisco. She laughed. Asya had a certain confident elegance about her. She had recently given up a clerical job at the conservatory of music, where her mother was a piano teacher, conferring intelligentsia status.

We settled in. I took the lower right berth, Lena the lower left, and Asya the upper left. We all sat on the lower ones for now, arranging our things. Asya took out of her backpack a glass bottle, an empty plastic orange soda bottle, a McDonald's Styrofoam cup, two blue metal cups, and some small squares of paper that I realized were napkins. I took out my Walkman and the latest Ferron and Jane Siberry tapes and some queer magazines. Lena and Asya, looking hungrily at the magazines, smiled as I turned over the treasures to them.

Before they could get into them, a man opened our compartment door and without a word handed us a folder of eight-by-eleven American photos of male body builders and female fashion models. He apparently wanted us to buy them. We shook our heads no. The man had opened our door as if it were his compartment, no knocking, no "excuse me."

I was also surprised by the *provodnitsa's* power. She even chose when and how loudly to play the radio. We could turn down the sound of Russian rap in our compartment but not in the corridors. The train was not the only place during my travels through Russia that I noticed this controlling air of the person in charge and the submissiveness of those they were in charge of, an unwillingness to challenge the status quo.

The toilets on the train were unbelievably disgusting. I later learned that this also depended on the *provodnik* or *provodnitsa* and on the age of the train. At first the smell and filth of the toilet was so overpowering that I couldn't even stay in there for long. There was no toilet paper or soap, you had to bring your own. The rocking of the train made it difficult not to touch the dirty toilet seat; I had to hang onto the bar on the wall beside the toilet to prevent contact. Of course there were no showers. Every other day I would take a washcloth bath, which was refreshing in the pervasive metallic and grimy atmosphere.

In our *kupe* I took naps, lulled by the swaying train and the smell of clean sheets. It was the best way to get over jet lag. There was something comforting about sleeping whenever you wanted to. "The girls" pored over the magazines—*Deneuve*, *the Advocate*, *Outlook*. Like children with new toys, they shared my Walkman, and occasionally one got impatient and snatched it away from the other, who of course resisted. At times like this their youthfulness really showed.

In one of the issues of *Outlook*, an old-fashioned, lighthearted drawing depicted a 1950s Doris Day-ish woman pointing her rear end toward a butch with a whip. Lena kept flipping back to that page. "Which one would you like to be?" I asked her. She pointed to the "bottom." I looked at Asya, "And you?" "I don't like that... but if I had to choose, it would be the other one." I said that I couldn't decide. We all laughed.

The train made twenty-four stops from Khabarovsk to Novosibirsk. The total distance from Khabarovsk to Moscow is eight thousand five hundred miles, and the total travel time on the train is seven days and six nights. Even though the scenery was so similar—flat steppes and tufts of forest punctuated by little settlements of wooden houses with lace-like shutters—I never felt bored. People worked in the fields, occasionally a truck drove along the road beside the train tracks, but there were no cars, only tractors or trucks. The steppes were bare, as I had imagined they would be.

In our homey little *kupe*, Asya called Lena *koshka* which means cat, and Lena called Asya *zayets* which means rabbit. Often they used these endearments in front of other train travelers. Whenever I remarked on their public affection, they laughed. "Oh, we're sisters. Amazons." (The word for "sisters" in Russian can also mean "cousins.") Their romance made them glow. Their slurpy kisses echoed from the upper berth. We talked into the night as though we were at camp, Asya's dimples deepening as she laughed, and Lena's animated face appearing as she lifted her head from Asya's lap to say something.

I asked each of them separately to tell me when they first felt they were lesbians. Lena was eager to begin, her gray eyes wide open, her hands gesturing with abandon. I turned on my tape recorder and began my first real interview in Russia.

"At college I became attracted to a girl named Olga. I had a serious crush on her. She wasn't the first girl I felt this way about. I would call her. She thought it was all some kind of joke. I started kissing her, hugging her. By the way, at that time I didn't really know that I was a lesbian. I had heard of such people, but I thought that very, very few of them existed, and that they were strange. Sometimes friends would say something bad about them. I would agree with these statements, but inside I wanted terribly to meet some of these lesbians. Where are they? How can I meet them?

"One day a girlfriend of mine came up to me and said: 'I was in the cafe today and there were some gay men there.' I said, 'Really? What were they doing?' 'They sat around a table calling each other Masha and Natasha and other girls' names.' 'Oh how awful,' I said. 'How gross! Foo! Disgusting!' At the same time I was thinking—how

I'd love to see them myself! There was something about them that reflected me, my own outlook."

Lena spoke about her attempts to be straight (*normal'na* in Russian) like the other girls. She thought of marrying Olga's brother to be closer to her. After school she worked as a nurse in Erfurt, East Germany, in an army hospital, but she continued to feel attracted to women. She met and fell in love with Tanya who was thirty-one, much older than she.

"Tanya was very good to me. She always invited me on walks; she liked to talk with me. I never was open with her about my attraction to her. I was afraid. We talked about men and other things. I also felt attracted to Lena, our supervisor, who was about twenty-nine; I was twenty-one. Tanya and Lena were very different. While Tanya was slender and sweet, Lena was a large woman but I really liked her.

"We lived in a collective. I generally liked to kiss and hug women in a friendly way. Once I stroked Lena's breast. She got upset with me for a long time. Then I thought: why did I ever do that? We would all get together, the men and the women, on October 3, to celebrate the reunification of Germany. We drank and partied. There was a woman who lived with us at the dormitory. I wasn't attracted to her but she had that quality, that lesbian look. After the party she was with me, she drew me toward her and began to kiss me. We fell on the bed and she continued to kiss me. I got so scared after awhile that I ran to my room. My mind was racing—what was all that about, how did it happen? And the next day I was so worried that she would tell someone. Well, she's from Belorussia, kind of naive, blabs about everything. Everyone was sitting around in the common room and I couldn't believe it! She suddenly blurts out, 'Lenka, remember how we were kissing yesterday?' I sat there stunned, thinking, Why is she saying this in front of everyone?"

When Lena began describing how wonderful it was to see her first lesbian erotic film, *Emanuelle*, my mind wandered to how I felt when I first saw the film. I was married to my husband at the time and I thought how amazing it was that Lena and I—of such different ages and times and countries—could have such similar feelings and experiences about coming out.

"When I saw that film, I began to understand that this was my sexuality, I needed to see this in the movies," said Lena. "I was already twenty-two and I had been with a man and never experienced an orgasm. To be with a man was like drinking a glass of tea. Actually, drinking a cup of tea is actually more pleasurable."

"What did you feel when you first met Asya?" I asked her when Asya had gone off to wash our "dinner dishes" in the bathroom.

"This was such an amazing day and this is true! The twenty-third

of March was supposed to be my wedding day, but it was the date I first met Asya as well as Olga and the others [the other Siberians who went to the film festival]. It turned out to be such an incredibly happy day! The day my life changed. I postponed my wedding indefinitely.

“What did I feel that day? I was like a bird. I couldn’t believe what was happening yet I felt like I was doing something I’d wanted to do all my life. How could I go to bed with a woman? What would I do? How is this possible? For a long time I didn’t know anything about sex, making love. It was forbidden.

“I remember the first night with Asya, how scared I was. I even said to her: ‘I guess we need to make up another bed for you.’ ‘Of course not,’ she said. I was afraid of her. Then I realized she too was inexperienced. I realized I had been walking around all my life under a shell. This, my natural self, my intuition, my love had led me to this place.

“I have now been with Asya over a year. I love her, she loves me. I think our relationship will be long. What surprises me, at the same time that I love her immensely and deeply, is that it doesn’t stop me from being interested in, getting excited about, and even wanting other women. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it. I think it even helps one in life.”

There was no law against lesbian sex in Soviet Russia, but it was forbidden, as Lena said. I felt I had to explain that there was also a lot of homophobia in the United States, too. In Russia I had heard stories of women being institutionalized in psychiatric hospitals and being urged by psychiatrists to either change their sex or to force themselves to date men. I told Asya and Lena that the U.S. was not the mythic land of freedom they thought it was. I had a friend who suffered electroshock treatments in her youth for her lesbian feelings. Gay bashing occurred even in the gay capital, San Francisco. They listened but didn’t seem to believe me.

Asya was not so willing as Lena to talk, perhaps it was just difficult for her to open up. She thought deeply but she was also quite moody. I had to try to catch her when the time was right on our four-day journey to Novosibirsk. I liked watching her shop for food at the train stations, which she seemed to enjoy. I usually went with her out of curiosity but she was fast and I sometimes lost her in the crowds.

Trains and train stations are the very lifeblood of Russia. Everything seemed to happen there. From love affairs to murders, from buying and selling to simply sitting and watching, the train station was the place to be in Russia. I’d also heard that Russian gay men traditionally met each other at train stations, especially at the public toilets.



In large green canopied stands, peasant women sold homemade potatoes, piroshki, pickles. Some carted their products around in baby carriages. I grew fond of kefir, a kind of yogurt milk, and *bulochki*, sweet breads sometimes filled with jam. People from town would buy cigarettes and vodka from the train personnel. There was lots of yelling and bargaining, then cursing and pleading and women crying. It was as if every train that arrived was the biggest event in town and everyone wanted to participate in some way.

Only a few times did we eat in the dining car. The hours were unpredictable and the food was about the worst I have ever had—greasy, tasteless, and extremely limited. But the dining car had its own peculiar life. I liked going in there just to watch the dining car supervisor smoking and drinking at a table by herself, her hair piled on her head and her lips smeared with red lipstick. The waiter would sashay down the aisle with his collar turned up, looking very important. “Do you think he’s gay?” I asked Lena once. “Nyet.” she said with such certainty lowering her eyebrows. He would stand at people’s tables shaking his head every time someone pointed to something on the menu, finally admitting in a monotone, “We only have fatty pork and vermicelli today.”

One day when Lena was sleeping, Asya and I stood in the corridor, leaning on the curtain bar at the window, staring out at the Siberian landscape. Two sailors stood at a window further down, leaning against each other affectionately. It was startling for me to see this kind of relaxed intimacy among military men, but it was not the first time. I had seen other pairs of men with their arms around each other’s waists or on their hands on each other’s hips. I later noticed that young women were even more affectionate with each other, often kissing and nuzzling each other in public, as well as holding hands. That was why no one seemed particularly perturbed when Asya and Lena hugged each other sensually in the corridor.

I told Asya what a strange sight it was for me to see men being affectionate. She smiled, and I explained. “If an American came across

people of the same sex being so affectionate, he or she would immediately think they were being sexual. I feel sorry for straight women who may want to be affectionate with each other. They're too afraid of being identified as lesbian."

Asya frowned. "Who knows, maybe that will eventually happen here!"

"When did you first identify as a lesbian?" I ventured, hoping she would at last want to tell. She kept staring out the window, speaking softly in her sexy, deep voice.

"As young as 18. But you know, it wasn't that serious. I could never put myself in some kind of a box and say, this is what you are, this is where you belong, and that's it. No. I very calmly took on that name, lesbian. I was twenty-one when I sent Benjamin in Barnaul a letter connecting with him as a gay man. He wanted to help start a social network among Novosibirsk queers. Even though I had had no experience whatsoever with lesbians, and had never even talked with one, I was very clear and simply wrote: 'The fact of the matter is I am a lesbian. Therefore, Benjamin, I would like to meet a girl.' I wrote it with such ease. I had no difficulty whatsoever.

"Did you have any experiences earlier? With your girlfriends?" I asked.

"Some not very serious experiences, when we were all trying to figure out who we were. Later I began to realize that women were really attractive to me. I would think all day and all night about some girl and then come to school and look at her and again think about her.

"But my girlfriends? No, the ones I really wanted were not my girlfriends but women I barely knew or didn't know at all. For example, once I was simultaneously interested both in a classmate of mine and in someone who sang for the theater where my mother worked. These were women of my age and older."

We were silent. A drunk soldier passed us on his way to the toilet, brushing hard against us. Asya did not bat an eye. Personal space in Russia was almost nonexistent. I was getting ready to give him a shove, when he walked on. He stumbled on a soft spot in the corridor floor, but he made it to the toilet. The stench descended on us almost immediately after he opened the door.

After a pause Asya went on.

"But did I want a woman physically from the age of eighteen? A woman, exactly? Clearly? A woman and not a man? I still didn't have any experience with girlfriends, beyond a little hug. We may have slept in the same bed, but I had no other experience with them. There was nothing romantic, just friendship. I just never acted on my feelings when I had them. I never permitted that. I don't know why,

why I limited myself. I just knew that the time would come, when I could do this without fear, with someone just like me. I would know, and the person would accept me. I was right. My first experience was with a person who really understood me—that was Lena. For her too I was her first experience. So Lena was my first and only experience.”

I nudged her shoulder and said, “Tell me what you felt with Lena.”

“Oyy... Sonja, the feelings were so amazing. I tried to write them down. I feel there is the beginning of something, maybe a book, something is there inside me. I am not writing now. I left all that home. My feelings were so great that it seemed like wings grew out of my shoulders. That was my first real love. It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. That’s why I don’t want to lose Lena.

“I didn’t feel any kind of confusion or agitation. Maybe a little, the first few hours we all got together—Benjamin, Alexey, Olga, Lena, there was another girl too. When I saw how Benjamin and Alexey were hugging and kissing each other, I felt fogged up or something—I had to get used to it. But I liked it. I really did. Because it was very dear and they were sweet guys, kind. So when I got used to the idea that I was among my own people, that I could speak freely, completely openly, whatever I wanted, I did what I wanted to do. I took Lena’s leg and stroked it.”

We both laughed. My laugh was unusual for Russia. I noticed people tended to be quiet in public, so as not to be noticed. An older woman in a kerchief came out of a compartment down the corridor and stared at us. She was the only other woman in our car. Men and women share the same compartments in Russia. At first the idea really repelled me, but toward the end of my stay, I was taking the train and sharing compartments with all kinds of men and women I didn’t know. People were polite and considerate for the most part, and very curious. Russians always seemed to know I was a foreigner.

Asya looked at me excitedly, wanting to go on.

“Yes, Lena wore a short skirt and black boots. At first we didn’t even pay attention to each other. I thought she didn’t care for me, and she thought I didn’t care for her. At first we were a little nervous, then I sat next to her. I couldn’t eat or drink or anything. I just wanted Lena, I wanted to be with her, talk with her. I was smoking, smoking, smoking the whole time. Then I jumped up and sat next to her. I put my hand under the table so no one would see. Our hands met for a moment then I touched her leg, and then I understood everything—I didn’t have to be afraid with Lena. I could say anything, do anything.”

The compartment door suddenly clicked and slid open. Lena looked at us sleepily, moaning that she was hungry. “I’ll get the tea ready right away, kotyonok [kitten],” Asya brushed Lena’s permed

hair away from her face and kissed her on the lips. The woman in the kerchief eyed us again, then looked out the window.

I loved that we ate whenever we felt like it. And Asya liked fussing over Lena and me. It was quite a switch from my independent single life in the States. Russians take care of each other's needs much more—even to the point of telling each other what they should wear, which reminded me of my mother!

It was late afternoon. At night the train became quite active—the soldiers and sailors drank a lot and joked and argued loudly. The men were generally okay toward us women except when they were really rowdy. We'd lock our *kupe* so as not to be bothered. Once we had to call the *provodnitsa* when an uninvited drunk Russian came into our compartment and wouldn't leave. She appeared at the door and very sternly took the guy's arm and yanked him out. He didn't struggle.

I studied the red-haired attendant and thought about an incident a San Francisco friend of mine once told me. She had taken the Trans-Siberian Railroad across Russia two years earlier and had had an affair with a *provodnitsa*. I was shocked then but now I could imagine just about anything happening on the train.

The Central Asian soldiers, the Azerbaijanis, and other brown-skinned military men, seemed polite, but "the girls" made all kinds of prejudiced remarks about them. "The Azerbaijanis are very crafty. Russians are so innocent and passive, they get hoodwinked by them," said Asya. It was not only that the Azerbaijanis were a darker race, but that they were merchants—Russians resented this. "And the Tatars, they can wrap Russians around their little fingers. Don't I have you wrapped around my finger, *zayets*?" Lena leaned close to Asya. "You're not a Tatar, you're a Russian," said Asya, pushing her away. It was difficult to find any "pure" Russians, especially in Siberia.

Our Lena was in fact a Tatar. Asya was just projecting her own mother's prejudices. We had talked earlier about a boyfriend she had before meeting Lena. Asya said he was from Central Asia, "from Tashkent. After I met him, my mother and I started having major arguments. She is... and you already know some about my mother. She doesn't like Jews, Georgians, Armenians, Uzbeks. She only likes Russians. She hates lesbians, homosexuals, drug addicts, prostitutes. She only likes Russians, and only the good ones."

I asked what her mom thought of Lena.

Asya said, "She purposely insulted her by calling her a nurse. And she was always makes remarks about her nationality. She calls her 'Your Tatar.' Of course she's mine. My mother has some psychological problem with this. She only wants me to hang out with people who achieved some sort of intellectual level."

The woman in the kerchief inched closer and closer to our

compartment. She was very curious about us and she could tell I was a foreigner. Sometimes in my travels I would try to pass for an Estonian or someone with a non-Russian accent to avoid the trail of questions and instant friendship if I said I was American.

The woman was standing right at our window as we approached the immense Lake Baikal, still frozen in places. It was the most spectacular sight of the train trip. Huge chunks of ice were breaking up along its shores; people stood at its edges with fishing poles. We chugged alongside it for two hours, sometimes as close as several yards from the water. Lake Baikal is the world's deepest (1.6 kilometers) and oldest lake (twenty-five million years or more). Over 365 rivers flow into it and only one river, the Angara, flows out of it. People in our car lined the windows reverently.

The woman asked Asya and Lena if they were sisters. "We're all sisters," Asya laughed, embracing both Lena and me. Small eyes stared expressionlessly from the woman's pale, wrinkled face. I told her later that I was American but "please keep it to herself. I don't want the whole train to find out." She asked me about the food we ate, about prices, employment and many other things. She and her husband, who sat in the corridor seat and stared zombielike out the window, never uttering a word, had gone to visit their son and his family in Khabarovsk. She occasionally said things about her husband, as if he couldn't hear, but he never reacted. As he shuffled around the car, I noticed his teeth were a shiny, silvery metal.

The woman told me she was a Russian-born German. "I was taken away from my family to work in factories during the war. The Germans were treated like slaves, moved from place to place—Kazakhstan, the Urals, Siberia. I worked on the railroad, in a kolkhoz. We were not permitted to speak German. We were only given our freedom in 1956." I hadn't known about the oppression of Germans in Russia. Nazi Germans had attacked the Soviet Union and killed hundreds of thousands of people during World War II and this was retribution.

In Irkutsk we had another adventure. Our train was stopped for nine hours and police were everywhere. Rumor had it that someone had been killed on the train. Some of the sailors had been drinking and smoking between cars, and one was either pushed off or fell and died. The rumor in our car was there was a big fight and the young sailor who had been wandering around our car was hiding from the police. The police finally picked out four military men, including him, and took them away for questioning. I asked Asya if there was a death penalty for murder in Russia. She said only in very rare cases. Most murderers spend about five years in prison if they get convicted.

After the long stop, the train made up for lost time and sped

along the tracks furiously, bouncing and rocking us around as we tried to sleep. When we stopped in Krasnoyarsk, we thought our friend Natasha would try to meet us in the station for a quick visit. Lena had telegrammed ahead but she couldn't get away from work. We were anxious to get home to a regular bed and home-cooked food.

We went to sleep for the last leg of our journey. I felt cold; the *provodnitsa* must have decided not to turn on the heat. The next time I woke up, Lena was climbing down from the upper berth with Asya to get into her own bed across from me. She noticed me open my eyes, and we both smiled. She bent over and kissed me on the forehead. I felt comforted and happy; they had taken good care of me and of each other. I did not know then that this would be the start of a long relationship I would have with Siberia—or that Asya and Lena would break up in less than a year.

The Siberian Interviews Journal: July 1995

An amazing week videotaping interviews with Tracy Thompson, a videographer from San Francisco. We interviewed eight people in three cities in one week, including two women. Tracy was a joy to work with, an easygoing person. Whenever there were the inevitable problems she'd say, "We'll be laughing about this two hours from now."

Yes, there were difficulties. One time we had trouble exchanging a hundred dollar bill at the train station and had a whole funny adventure trying to sell off some of our things to raise money to get out of the little town of Taiga in order to get to Tomsk. For our video project one of our goals was to look for women with experiences during Communism, which meant women of the older generation. We were introduced to an older woman in Tomsk who had been fired from her university position when her "sexual deviancy" became known, but she refused to do an interview even after agreeing to meet with us.

I wondered sometimes why I was involved in such a project. Was I imposing Western or U.S. perceptions of same sex relationships on these people? Tracy (who was not a lesbian) and I had lots of discussions on this subject and on the idea of labeling. Why do we do this? It has political roots, but some people, like the woman in Tomsk thought we were working in "a completely narrow context," as she put it. I tried to convince her that we only wanted to capture life stories on film, not talk about her relationship or her orientation, but she refused.

When I translated to Tracy that the professor did not want her to set up the big camera, the professor said, "You will never convince people that this [being gay] is okay. It will never be okay because it is against nature." Ruled by her internalized homophobia, she lived quietly, secretly, with her partner and her partner's mother. Nevertheless, she and her partner were lovely and generous people; they made us blinis filled with cheese, topped with sour cream, great herb tea and delicious cabbage and sausage. When her partner had to leave to go back to work, she took Tracy's face in her hands and kissed both her cheeks. Disapproving, the professor said, "Why did you have to go and do that?" I stood up wanting to get my kisses too. Her partner said, "Because they are so beautiful," and went off in a flourish.

I'd like to be writing a novel to be able to encompass all these feelings and conversations. My book may become something else in the end. In any case, my experience with Russia, my attempts to

understand and listen to people and see how they think and live has broadened my own thinking. If anything I have become more open to change, more accepting of diverse ways of life. I have even loosened up about defining myself. I see more clearly how my own history and context influence me, my work, and my identity.

Yesterday I interviewed Sasha, an anesthesiologist at the Regional Hospital. I admired his openness. He told me he never wanted to go back into the closet again and he is even willing to risk death and imprisonment to be who he is, although he didn't feel that way in his twenties when it was very risky to be open. He mentioned how Russians had been taught to see Americans as enemies and in general to blame others rather than take responsibility for things, to look for possible enemies everywhere, including in homosexuals. While he was saying all this, I thought how similar that was to our culture, the Cold War anti-communist mentality. He was only thirty-five and enjoying explaining himself. With his stutter, I worried I wouldn't be able to translate his words correctly later.

Traveling through these Siberian cities has been fascinating. While I'd been to Krasnoyarsk before, watching Tracy marvel at the city and enjoy Siberia gave me a certain pride. We both really liked Tomsk, too. The queer community there was welcoming and helpful. I hoped to get back in the fall. Tomsk was full of charming wooden houses of all sizes interspersing the city. Did the city government decide to keep some and get rid of others or did they build the modern buildings among them in some grand design? There was a youthful upbeat spirit in Tomsk, probably because of the presence of the university, the first in Siberia, founded in 1888.



My favorite interview of all was with Oleg Kuzmich Raspopov of Novosibirsk, a man who spent 18 years in prison camp—three separate sentences; the last he opted for was a closed (prison) psychiatric hospital. He said he had made a mistake and that it turned

out to be worse than any prison camp. He was a winsome person, warm, positive, and passionate. Fifty-five years old, he lived alone with his little dog Yasha. One-man shows were his passion before being sent to prison and he won numerous prizes. He seemed comfortable in front of the camera, a real professional!

Kuzmich had endless stories. We went back to him a second time because we knew he had more to say. I noticed that when he spoke about sexual relations in prison he used the word “lyubov”—LOVE. It wasn’t just sex for him. I actually teared up as we ended the second interview. When asked what message he wanted to send to others, he said with a dramatic flair, “I hope to live to see the day when we can openly socialize, meet our comrades and brothers in a club, admire each other and freely relax with each other—openly.” I knew how much I wanted to be allied with his way of thinking rather than with that of the woman professor.

One of Kuzmich’s violations was sex with underaged boys (under 18 in Soviet law). He was not however a pedophile. When he was a twenty-year-old, he may have had relations with a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old. He talked about his attractions to younger men but I did not get a sense any of this involved coercion. It disturbed me that I was talking with someone who may have taken advantage of young people sexually. However, his interview gave important insights into Russian prison life and the situation of Soviet gays. Of course, I don’t know exactly what happened, but I do think his lengthy imprisonment was unjust and discriminatory.

Of the video eight interviews Tracy and I did, there were two women: Tanya of Novosibirsk and Lusya of Krasnoyarsk. While I’m glad we spoke to them, we did want to find out more about LGBT attitudes and life problems during Soviet times but could not find women of the older generation willing to talk to us.

Tanya was Tatar by nationality who grew up in that minority culture. Her parents, while they were educated, ended up being servants for the Communist leadership who vacationed at the Novosibirsk Communist Party dachas. Tanya met her first girlfriend at that vacation place. Tracy and I walked with her as she told this story. We had problems coordinating the filming because of Tracy not knowing Russian. It was a wonderful walk down Tanya’s memory lane. I had to translate what Tracy needed to film, while interviewing Tanya. It was a challenge. Despite Tracy’s worries, it turned out to be great footage!

The other woman in our interviews was Lusya, who I first interviewed on audio three years prior (see “Siberians: Two Interviews”). After she and her partner Nadya split up, I visited Lusya several times in Krasnoyarsk. She works in a factory, considers herself

transsexual or transgender. She doesn't intend to get an operation or do hormones. I was happy to see that she was doing better than ever. I believe part of why she felt more confident was her connections with other sexual minorities. Isolation is the worst fate! She was ridiculed and bullied as a child for her German nationality and even called a fascist. Now she has a new girlfriend. At the end of our interview, they both sang while the girlfriend played the accordion.

In these interviews, the men often spoke of the terrifying roundups of gay men in all three Siberian cities—Novosibirsk, Tomsk, and Krasnoyarsk—as late as in the mid 1980s. The fear of constant police raids and being blackmailed and bribed and questioned has taken a psychological toll. The threat of incarceration was very strong in these communities. The imprisonment of gays was probably more widespread in Russia than anywhere else, just as their gulag in its time was a more extensive prison system than in any other country.

Nevertheless, the first interview we had was with Boris of Novosibirsk who said he was never threatened and never even came close to being imprisoned, even though he was openly gay since about the age of 16. It's not really clear what the conditions would have been for someone to get nailed. One man said he prevented it by never engaging or even flirting. If there was no evidence of the act, they couldn't convict people but in other cases it seemed so easy. People were imprisoned if they were merely hanging out with young people. I heard of frame-ups as well.

After these interviews, I learned that the separate sections in prisons for "the degraded ones" were for the "passive" partners, and that the men who were raped in prison were also sent there. Kuzmich told us that he avoided being sent to that section of the prison simply by passing himself off as an "active" partner. He put on a heavy macho persona. "Everyone knew why you were in prison—you couldn't hide it." Many of the degraded ones suffered the most. Some were killed in prison, and some took their own lives.

What an odyssey this has been! I can't even write anymore.



Eighteen Years in the Gulag: Kuzmich



Kuzmich, photo by Tracy Thompson

I first heard about Kuzmich while doing my eight Siberian videotaped interviews in the summer of 1995. Boris, a gay man I interviewed, mentioned a man who had spent eighteen years in the gulag for being gay. When Boris saw my excitement, he volunteered right then to call Kuzmich who lived nearby in Novosibirsk: “I’m sure he’d be interested in an interview.”

With Boris and videographer Tracy Thompson, my collaborator, I went to Kuzmich’s apartment by metro. It was near the Shkolnaya Station, an area dominated by several colleges and very close to where I had lived on a previous stay in Novosibirsk. Around the metro station people sold fruit, vegetables, vodka, clothes, and knickknacks; a man was selling eggs from the tailgate of a parked truck. We waded through people and stalls, finding a worn path into a courtyard of buildings. The sudden quiet there, except for a few children playing in the dirt square, was a relief. Trees waved in the heat. A few people walked in and out of building doorways. At the front of one building a man waited, holding a little black chihuahua lookalike. Boris nodded in his direction: “That’s Kuzmich.”

Kuzmich’s face was ruddy, animated, and lined; he had big expressive eyes highlighted by thick gray eyebrows. Wearing an old suit jacket, casual sweatpants, and a cap saying “USA California” (the

same cap mass-produced all over Russia), he seemed like a typical Russian man in his fifties. He shook Boris's hand, then mine, bowing slightly: "Very nice to meet you." He led us up to his second-floor apartment.

The place seemed dark at first, like a cave. It was a typical two-room apartment (one a combination kitchen and dining room, the other a sitting room and bedroom with a convertible couch). Dark brown beaded curtains separated the rooms. I parted them, clickety-clack, and followed Kuzmich into a cozy, golden-lit room. Oriental rugs lined the walls. Two couches, two armchairs, and a low wooden table with a phone on it were tastefully decorated, a clean kind of clutter. It was a small room but everything had its place. Framed photos and a crucifix hung on the wall, high above the doorway, with a magazine photo of a muscular man in briefs and a poster of a monkey eating a banana on either side. The bookshelves were filled with Russian classics. An apartment with a clear personality, a mixture of seriousness and intelligence, fun and erotica.

"I need a comfy home to invite my boyfriends to, don't I?" Kuzmich said when I commented how warm and comfortable the room was.

He offered me coffee and chocolates, but there was no delay. He seemed eager to tell his story. Tracy set up her camera, and I sat in a chair opposite Kuzmich. As he spoke, his hands and face in dramatic motion, I realized he had a true gift of storytelling and was indeed a performer.

"In Soviet times I was twice convicted. When I was arrested for the third time, I was advised—that was it. I figured it out myself, you know? How many times can I serve these sentences? Murderers, they discharge. But me, a gay man? First I served eight years, then another six years—how much longer can I do this? What else could I do? I thought, well let me try the crazy house. So I myself chose to go to the crazy house and turn myself in. The doctor who received me asked me to fill out an application. They accepted me, and for a month they observed me. They determined that I was a schizophrenic at the moment of committing my crime.

"That was how I was committed the last time, not to a prison camp, but to a prison psychiatric hospital in Kazakhstan. There were ten such hospitals in the Soviet Union. I went to that hospital, but I curse that hospital—it would have been better for me in the camp. I was there for five years. Altogether I served eighteen years, for Article 120 and Article 121."

While Article 120 was specifically geared toward male sex with male minors and Article 121 criminalized homosexuality, both laws were used to put thousands of men in prison and to associate

homosexuality with pedophilia. Kuzmich openly admitted to having consensual sex with teenage boys. I did have some uneasy feelings about him but his story was one of the most detailed and descriptive of the situation in Russia for gays. The laws were not so much instituted to protect minors, as they were used to frame-up and criminalize homosexuals.

“In Soviet times in Novosibirsk, it’s amazing, but there was even a special group of police assigned to gays. There was one Kungurtsev, now deceased, got promoted on the backs of gays. Once every two years they’d catch us, round us up, arrest us. That’s how it was.

“You know, we had meeting places we called pleshki. City toilets, parks, squares, beaches, theaters. And just so they would have something to show for their paychecks, once a year or every two years they’d catch some frail, terrified creature who worried about his status (there were some intelligent people among us, you know). They’d catch him, he’d crack and betray the rest of the bunch. The suspicion this promoted, the slandering of one another, and such ridiculous trials. What a nightmare!

“The trials were an embarrassment, a real shame. At my own trial, Kungurtsev bragged: ‘I’ll send you to the gulag.’ For what? Why to the Gulag? I was the best [Communist] youth leader in the region and in the city at that time, it was 1962, that was my first conviction. [Kuzmich was twenty-one in 1962.]

“You know, I once went to speak to a regional sex pathologist. He said to me, ‘I understand you, young man. But I have to be a witness at these trials. What can I do?’ It turned out these roundups had been occurring in Novosibirsk since 1953. Every two years!

“Between my own three sentences there was only about a year and a half or so each time. I was released last in 1984, in May. Now it’s been eleven years of freedom, eleven years that I feel like a human being. But in these eleven years much has happened, big changes, very big.

“Naturally, of course, I can’t say that I am gay, not out loud in the street, but people look surprised that I walk around in fancy shorts in summer. I’m in my 50’s and I go out looking like that. I’m a bit of a show-off. I just enjoy relaxing, like a human being. I’m not too bad to look at, I’m hairy all over, always have been, women go nuts over me, but too bad, what can you do?

“I can tell you about how at eighteen years old I tried to get married. I thought about conquering this thing inside me. I already knew that Tchaikovsky was like that, our great composer. There were also books I had seen, of course not with the word gay in them, and so on, Lord, that would be too obvious.

“I thought I should struggle against that feeling in me, so I got

married in 1960. I have a daughter, she's thirty-four, but too bad, it didn't work for me. My wife . . . I tried it with her for about eight months, and that was it. My attractions could not be still. My first conviction came when I was married and my daughter was six months old. That's the way it was.

"My wife was really great, though, a wonderful person, a literate person. She would come visit me. The first time, she waited for me. She waited and waited. At the second conviction, I begged her, 'Larisa, I'm that kind of person. I'm gay and that's it. You're a beautiful woman. Go find yourself a man,' but she waited then, too. She wrote letters, such letters! She really supported me. It was just wonderful. A great person, spiritual and all. We keep in touch still, we call each other. You know, we have a daughter together. In 1977 she finally decided to get married to someone else, and we finally divorced, which was no problem because I was a convict. But we're in touch because of our daughter. They help me still, send me cucumbers, tomatoes. They have a dacha, I don't.

"Can you explain Articles 120 and 121, the articles specifically criminalizing gay sex?"

"Article 120 was on general perversity, as in, say, I invite a guy over, dance with him, touch him. That's Article 120. But when I sleep with a guy, that's already Article 121. Oral sex is still Article 120. Article 121 had two parts: when adult men sleep with adult men and when adult men sleep with guys under the age of 21. That part was punished by sentences up to eight years. In the new Code of Law, the first part about sleeping with other adult men isn't there anymore, but the second part is still there.

"The first time I was convicted in 1962 when I was working at a youth camp, I was a youth leader then, and I was convicted for corruption of fourteen-, fifteen-, sixteen-year-old boys, my inclination. For Article 120 and 121 they gave me eight years hard labor, but then they let me go in six years, pardoned me for good behavior. The second time was for minors also, two boys. They gave me Article 121, part 2 again. The sentence was another eight years, and I ended up serving seven years. The third time, in 1979, was again for two minors. I was deemed not responsible for my actions and they put me in a psycho hospital for five years. All together eighteen years. It's been eleven years that I am free."

"What the prison camps were like?"

"When I was in the camp, I got lucky. I shouldn't brag, but I have a good head on my shoulders and a little education, even though I was born to a very simple family, a working-class family. In prison I came across someone I knew who told me, 'Be very firm and don't let on to anyone that you are here because of boys. When they bring a copy of

your sentence to your cell, don't accept it, because people can find it and read it. Then you'll be finished. Pederasts are beaten and kept under the bunks.'

"Oh, my goodness, that year, 1962, the prison was jam-packed. I will remember that until I die! There were fifty-three people in our cell alone, although only eighteen were supposed to be there. That's the way it was. And now I hear it's even worse. Anyway, at the time there were these buckets. You know, buckets for toilets, in the corner. In 1962, the prison in Novosibirsk had started building these general toilets, but the buckets were still located right in the cells. And in the summertime, imagine what it was like! Disgusting.

"Naturally, how gays were treated was very bad. The only way they were saved was if they got into the degraded cell [a different level and section where all those who were raped and the 'passive' homosexuals were sent]. That was the only way you could be saved, but otherwise your place, where you lived, was underneath the bunks. Whoever wanted to could rape you and take care of their needs whatever way they wanted.

"Thanks to the advice that man gave me, and thanks to my good sense, I told them, 'I'm in for corruption of minors,' both during my first sentence and my second. Only the third time did I get unlucky, but I'll tell you about that later. So I'd say, 'corruption of minors, boys and girls,' that's all, and I would just laugh. I was a leader then. What saved me was that I had just finished training as an entertainer and events organizer.

"In 1961, on Lenin Square, I put on events, competitions. This was what got me involved with young people. I loved this work. Everything turned out great. There were articles in the paper about me, in *Soviet Siberia*, in *Siberian Youth*. 'The young Oleg Raspopov is up and coming on the scene!' It was very good.

"I even did this in our cell. I organized chess matches and other games, I painted a chart of our duties. I read newspapers out loud. I am an orator. I've been gay for forty-two years, and forty-five years I've been an entertainer. I dance. I used to sing at the opera theater and recite things. Since I was about fourteen I've been a performer, I recited poetry. Twice I was a prizewinner, two different times, at two festivals. I have diplomas. I was invited to entertain many times. People related to me that way.

"I was twenty-two years old and in prison when they started calling me by my patronymic, Kuzmich, [middle name address is a sign of respect in Russia] for all my organizing work. Young, old, everyone called me that, both the first and second time, but it was still very difficult in the camp. Should I tell you about it? Well, it was just very difficult. The camp was worse than the prison, because when you

got there, they wrote out in the open 'Article 120 and 121.' Everyone knew, all the convicts knew that 121 meant 'faggot.'

"Someone said, 'So you're a fag, a goat, a queer, a rooster. So that's who you are! And you were hiding that over there in prison. You said you were in for boys and girls, but you are really a pederast.'

"My brain started working fast and I said, 'You wait! Would they give a passive [partner] eight years?' So I tried this even though I am both active and passive. I'd say this and I'd punch them. You know they aren't very educated in there. I told them I was active, that's why I got eight years.

"If you want some, I'll give it to you. If you ever take me, then you can call me pederast, but now you have no right.'

"I was born here in Novosibirsk, in Nakhalovka, a working-class neighborhood, a factory area, where people are very tough and crude. In those days, the fifties and sixties, there were fights everywhere. I would hide and watch all this. So when they would insult me in the slam, call me a pederast or a faggot, I would take my fist and just punch them in the face. And people respected me for this. I defended myself. The convicts respected me.

"Even the administration respected me. They gave me hard labor, construction work, but when they saw my diligence, my organizational abilities, they made me librarian. Then they appointed me cultural secretary of the camp. Entertainment events, concerts, plays got rolling, and because of this it became easier for me to survive there. Thanks to my brain, I lived okay.

"That was the first sentence. The prison was right here in Novosibirsk and the camp was next to a brick factory. That camp no longer exists; it was Camp 11. Wait a minute, for my first sentence, when they gave me hard labor, I was at Camp 3 in Matveyevka. They gave me hard labor, that's the kind of enemy of the people I was. Starting in 1959 there were different levels of labor: regular, intensified, hard labor, and extremely hard labor. And for my first offense, for corruption of minors, they gave me hard labor, but the administration saw that I just didn't belong in hard labor, where those people were serving heavy sentences of fifteen or twenty-five years. So the administration started advocating for me to get an easier level of labor, all because of my good work, my activity, my entertainment, my concerts, and so on.

"Thanks to the administration, they did change my level, but I was still unhappy. It was terrible. In the hard labor area, it was nice, a beautiful camp with nice concrete houses, only twenty miles from town. A great camp. When they transferred me to 'intensified,' they brought me to the other place, where we didn't have uniforms. I was in these little shoes and pajama things, and everywhere I stepped,

there was mud! But I went on and slopped through the mud into the camp. That's the way it was."

We laughed and he cuddled his little dog and kissed him.

"The second time was very bad. It was at Liteyka. The second time they gave me hard labor, eight years hard labor for two young men, teenagers. But these boys had been gay since they were ten years old. I've been gay from the age of twelve, and they since ten. At the trial we said that. Oh, excuse me, that was the third time. The second time, too, was for teenagers, though. So it was said at the trial that they were gay, but I was older. Eight years they gave me for that. And the boys—they took them to the crazy house. They gave them injections.

"You know, I was home between those sentences, and I worked in a factory, and even then I was very active, worked on events and did my own shows. I worked really hard and was recognized. I have a good personality. Even the judge was surprised—he thought I should be given an award, not sent to the camps.

"In Zone 14, Tabulga, in the Novosibirsk region, I worked at a furniture factory. There I was a drill press operator. I was a good worker. I immediately became an entertainer in the camp, basically so I could survive better in the group, at least relax a little. The first sentence already I was starting to go gray. By the time the second sentence happened my hair was white.

"I started entertaining and became the cultural secretary of the section. The reason it was very hard then is because of the people. Things were tough then—for a crust of bread, for some grains of sugar, people would knock one another down. They were very mean to each other there. These criminals came up to me, pestered me—'Hey, you're all right, we could fuck you!' and I'd start fighting them.

"During my second sentence I had to fight a lot. They'd put me in solitary for that—five days, ten days, fifteen days. I had to defend myself. I didn't want to go under the bunks because I wanted to be with a guy I liked, not be raped. That's how I did it. And I think I did right. And I would do it to the end of my days.

"Then, thank God, I got lucky again. The administration, the chief warden of the camp, for some reason begins to respect me, maybe for my energy. I fight back when I am insulted. I perform, I have a sense of humor, I recite satirical poetry, I'm funny. So the chief warden defends me. Yes. But the second in command is always after me, checking up on me. He just hated me for some reason, all the fibers of my being he hated. Maybe because of my cheerfulness. All those horrible people who were after me, he'd join in with them and in front of the entire camp he insulted me and called me a pederast.

“But I went forward no matter what. And that’s why the chief warden respected me. When he transferred to another camp, Camp 15, he took me with him. He made me a steward at Liteyka. As soon as I got there I organized a big cleanup, we painted everything. He appointed me librarian and then culture secretary for the camp, after the other one left. He even wrote a plea for pardon for me. But even though the officials respected me, it was tiring, tough.

“It was 1975. There were new rules and new kinds of barracks and fences built with bars and other things. It just felt harder. There was no discipline. There were murders even. In that camp where I had to fight, often it would be nighttime when one of the administrators came for me: ‘Raspopov, why are you always the first one to start a fight?! Come along...’

“There was another administrator—Victor Nikolayevich Kuznetsov. I will remember him to the end of my life: ‘I understand you, not completely, but I do understand you. You are clever, good, smart people. But choose your battles,’ he’d say. Because of him I got a break once in a while. If I had to fight that day, one of them would come in, take me from the barracks, and in the morning escort me back to my workplace: ‘Go, Raspopov, work!’ That’s how it was.

“My third term was even harder. The beginning usually is always hard. But then, you know life goes on, and on and on. The third time you know I was set free in September 1977. In 1978 in September, the police are already following me. Dangerous criminal in the city of Novosibirsk! My nickname was ‘Duchess Elisabeth of Siberia,’ so they think I am the main organizer. They bring me into the KGB office and say I know everyone. They bring me in for questioning together with ‘Queen Larisa.’ We gave these nicknames to gays in Novosibirsk, but that didn’t mean we were the main organizers. Did they think I had a card file of everyone? Silly idea. Kungurtsev was the head of this investigation, that bunch of Mafia. ‘You’re the ones with the files,’ I said.

“They had a file on every gay man in Novosibirsk. I personally saw it there, boxes with all the nicknames and everything. I know a lot, but I’m not the type who asks people their last names, where they live, etc. That’s not in my style. I’m not interested in those things. Some people are. You know, I was very offended that they thought. They said, ‘Give us the name.’ I’d say, ‘Vilya, that’s just her nickname, we just called her Vilya, such a nice girl, but her name—I don’t know her name. I just don’t know it.’ They don’t believe me. ‘You have the files. I don’t,’ I said. We were just joking, you know, joking that Duchess Elisabeth even had a card file. We had fun like when we got together on a beach or went on a trip to Moscow, or the theater. We joked. It was so beautiful before! Very difficult, but beautiful.

“Back to the third sentence. It was a hard one. I thought I would get what was called special labor. Because I already had hard labor I thought they would be sending me to this special labor camp. That was when you wore stripes and sat in a cell. By the way, during my second sentence, I’d bring those folks their food. That was awful.

“I had a hard time. I knew the police were following me. I went to talk to my friend, like I said earlier. He said: ‘Don’t worry. Just go to the psychiatric hospital. Turn yourself in and tell them everything.’ Frankly, I have to say, I came to him to ask for some poison. I wanted to poison myself. I didn’t want to serve another sentence and be in a special cell. I just couldn’t anymore.

“He said, ‘You love life. You’d never do that, poison yourself, forget it. Go to the crazy house.’

“I went there. Myself. Psychiatric Hospital 3 on Vladimir Street near the central railroad station. They received me. They kept me for about a month and a half there; they could have kept me longer, but they didn’t. And as soon as I left that hospital, I was arrested again. At first I didn’t mention the psychiatric hospital, but when I heard another eight-year sentence. This was my third offense, and by law, if there is a third conviction, you are a repeat offender and you get the special labor sentence—eight years.

“I told the interrogator, ‘That’s it, I won’t say anything else. Send me to the crazy house.’ That was in March of 1979. They arrested me in November of 1978 and this was 1979. ‘Send me to the nuthouse,’ I said.

“They let murderers go, give them medical treatment, rehabilitate them. And look at me! What am I? Many of the young men I was with [had sex with] were in the Party. They were photographed with their Komsomol medals for the newspapers. They’re professionals, engineers. Not one of them is considered a criminal! What’s that?

“I didn’t want to say another word. They sent me there for observation. I was in solitary for a month. They gave me all kinds of pills. I got drowsy. They started questioning me again. They gave me tests. More questions. I told about my life and what I felt. I felt what I’d felt since I was twelve years old—an attraction to boys. I would peek at boys in the toilet, not girls. That’s what I said to them. I told them everything.

“Then there was a committee of professors, doctors. And they admitted that I was not responsible for my actions, I was not a schizophrenic but I had a tendency, an inclination. Since I was under arrest, the court decided that on the basis of these findings, since I was not responsible for my actions at the moment of my crime, I would have to be sent to a hospital to be treated. Because I had been previously convicted, though, they didn’t send me to the hospital. I

went to of my own free will but to some other hospital in Kazakhstan. Psycho-neurological. Here there were people you wouldn't believe! Soldiers guarded the place, male nurses were there. It was a real prison. People ended up being there for years. A hundred to a unit.

"You know, I also met people there who were children of important people in Kazakhstan, men who had been bandits, robbed people for years in Almaty, but since they had parents in high places, they get to be 'sick people in the hospital.' Of course they leave after a year. This is also done through the courts. Court officials come to the hospital to check if they've been cured. They are shown papers and they let them go.

"I was there and they kept me for four years. First I was in a prison for two years. It was a horrible and disgusting place. In 1979 it was just awful. I even wrote a complaint to an attorney about it. They smash your head with a bowl and then rape you. Horrible. It's hard to remember this stuff.

"Then the hospital. I got wise there too. I did a couple of performances in the four years there too. The doctors and nurses respected me. As soon as I got there I asked around for a job. Since there wasn't any cultural work, I got to work in the laundry for two years. I did a good job, then wronged someone because of my inclinations. Even there! They sent me to the sewing room. I learned to sew and made money, put money away.

"One hearing, two, then at the third hearing they allowed me to leave. A representative brought me to Novosibirsk, and I was placed in Psychiatric Hospital 6 for another six months. Another hearing, then they released me, 1984. This term had started in 1977. In May 1984, changes started in, Gorbachev. God give him good health. New magazines started coming out. We can't say raw pornography, but good magazines, about sex, love, all kinds of pleasures, wonderful! At last I can own them without any problem..."

Kuzmich shows off some of his awards for acting. "This is my archive. Here, see how many certificates? This one is for good work, this for organizing events, folk art concerts, here is the folk art laureate, first place certificate. Oh, we did so many concerts before! Traveled all over the Soviet Union. After the third conviction I worked as a painter. And still did concerts. And just recently, a month ago, I participated in a concert for the veterans of World War II and earned a thousand rubles!"

He nuzzles Yasha again and says what a cute thing he is. Yasha curls up contentedly in Kuzmich's lap.

"I forgot the most important thing. You know, fags had to sit at a separate table. In the camps and in the hospital too. And I had to defend myself there, big time! If I told you everything you could do an

entire film about me!

"I'll tell you this story. My first sentence, I had stopped eating for three days. We arrived from Novosibirsk in 1963, about fifteen hundred people came altogether. They brought us to the camp where the boss was called Bear. That's what they called him! The guard says: 'Oh. He [Kuzmich] is Article 121, a pederast, feed him separately.' All the 'degraded' ones were separated. They rape them and then they separate them. I tried to fight back there, too, stand up for people. Didn't eat for three days. They said: 'Go ahead, pederast, eat.' On the fourth day, the cultural secretary of our section comes up to me and says, 'Go ahead, eat something, you can barely walk.' I say: 'You eat from that bowl!' [A bowl for only gay convicts] 'What?!'—and he raised his shovel. We were working on a stretch of track for a railroad. He raises his shovel to strike me. Even though I hadn't eaten for three days, I got up, got hold of him, knocked him down on the track and started beating his head on the rail. Then somebody got me away from him. Then back to the camp I got called into the boss's office. He was impressed, I dared to defend myself against an older, more reputable criminal! 'Okay, Raspopov, I read your file. I'll make you librarian.'"

"How many of the 'degraded ones' were really gay?" I ask. "Some of them were put there just because they were raped in prison."

"Before, there were a lot of gay people in camp, the first time I was in. The police did their dirty work every two years. In the '61 raid, they arrested eighteen, in '59 they got twenty [in Novosibirsk]. And so on. You know, they started it in 1953. In those years there were a lot of gays. You know, in prison, there are situations like he loses a card game and they say: 'Pay up or go to that place.' You could run to solitary for awhile, but in that system you can't really hide. If the administrator helps you and transfers you to another prison, otherwise, forget it. You get stuck with it. And your life is wasted. Your whole sentence! Okay, if it's one or two years, but some of the degraded ones had six or eight years. I know from my own life, wherever they sent you, to Krasnoyarsk, to Kizel-lag, to Uzul-lag, in the '60s or '70s, if you're a degraded one, gay, pederast, fag, you're stuck with it till you die—the rumor follows you from camp to camp. Terrible. You are lucky if you have a strong will, but young people. It was tough. I helped a lot of people, but it was still scary to deal with."

"In the hospital, they [the degraded ones] ate separately. What kind of a hospital is that? Worse than the camp. You could somehow talk to each other at the camp. But here you were with one hundred or one hundred twenty-five people and that's it. Usually everyone else eats first and then they come and eat. It's hard. I still don't understand it—in our time, separate bowls, separate spoons!"

"How did you recognize other gay men before?"

“I didn’t even know much about gays or where they met each other until my first conviction. In the camp I met real gays: Lyalya [a female name], Blackie, the captain, even one army officer. And it’s funny—they were real gays and had two-year sentences. I just tried it out and got eight. People even talked in the camp: ‘He must be the head guy there. He got eight years!’ And thanks to that, I didn’t even have to fight much. They did and I didn’t. Because I had 8 years! I told people: ‘What? Is it because I have eight years, because I am an active [partner] and no one will ever do me!’

“I wasn’t even embarrassed when in 1963 on the May First celebration we put on a vaudeville play by Chekhov called *The Jubilee*. I wasn’t even embarrassed to play the part of Tatyana Shipuchina! Wearing a dress and so on. And Merchukhina’s part, the secretary, was played by Tolya, who was 30, I was 22. The producer of the play was Lyalya Black, an actor from the Red Flame Theater, librarian in our camp. I played Tatyana Shipuchina and still made everyone in the camp respect me! If you don’t have self-respect, everyone will trample you.”

“Did you feel different when you were a child and in school?”

“No. I didn’t feel different then and I don’t feel it now. I am comfortable with any company. When I talk with women, they melt! I just like to talk. I can converse on any topic. No, I didn’t feel different in school. I was a little afraid. What if Sashka says something, or Vladka says something, or Petka? But then I started relaxing. I saw that some people just liked being with me. You know, they were attracted to me, already mature people, with children. They had medals, remarkable careers. No, there never were bad people among any of my boyfriends! Even at the camps when I lived with criminals, I had good relationships. They were afraid to talk about me and they respected me.”

“How did your family feel about your sexual orientation?”

“My daughter understands me, she understands me very well. She is thirty four and knows all about it. She is educated. She doesn’t have a problem with it. My mama, that’s a whole different thing. I have friends whose moms were like tigers, defending them! But my mama, such a beautiful person, she died just five years ago but never understood me. It was so hard for me. When I was in the camp, she did everything! She sent me food, money, wrote me such beautiful letters, came to see me, even had to ride in a helicopter one time to visit me in the camp! Mama was a wonderful person. But she died, died in my arms, and never got it that I am gay. She couldn’t. Even though she knew my friends whose moms defended them, even though she herself helped defend them and keep them from getting arrested, when I was already convicted.

“I told her once, ‘We could have such life together if you could just understand me! If you could be okay with my friends coming over, just like it was normal.’ But no, she couldn’t. She nagged, yelled, scolded me and so on. Because of that I couldn’t bring anyone home, and even when I got my own place I still felt uncomfortable. My brother is okay. He doesn’t keep in touch too much. My sister, too, just died. Every month I go visit them, her and Mama at the cemetery. My sister loved me!”

“What is that photo that looks like a shrine?” [I point to a photo high on the opposite wall.]

“It is of my friend Eduard. In 1968 he came to Novosibirsk from Chelyabinsk. He was a teacher, a physicist. In Chelyabinsk he was convicted under Article 120 and served a year. He was a beautiful person; I learned a lot of good things from him. A wonderful, intelligent man! He arrived here with his sixteen-year-old son. And he raised him until he was grown up. He gave him an education, prepared him for the Medical Institute. The boy grew up, graduated from medical school, and is now a great, remarkable surgeon. He has three children, and his older daughter is entering med school this year.

“The son isn’t gay, but Eduard was. Ed and I met at a pleshka, the post office. My friends said, ‘A new guy is around, such an interesting man! Comes once in a while, sits on a bench, but doesn’t talk to anyone.’ I said, ‘Well, maybe it’s because he doesn’t like you? Show me the guy!’ When we met, Ed said, ‘Would you help me make friends with people here? I don’t know anyone, I just came here.’ I helped him meet our comrades. He and I became friends. I was married then, I introduced him to my wife, and our two families became friends. He was never married. My wife and I visited him and his son. He was such a good, fun person.

“When he died a year ago, a lot of people came to the funeral, all his friends, students—he was very much loved. His son came. It was a good funeral; he was respected. He was one of the best teachers in the region, active in his trade union! Nobody at his school knew he was gay, even though he was arrested in 1970 here in Novosibirsk. He had to serve another three years. After he got out, he went to work at a new school; he didn’t tell them he was convicted. After six or seven years of brilliant work at this new school, a representative from the Municipal Education Office found out he was a teacher even while in the camp! He taught in the camp!

“And the representative goes, ‘Ah! He served time in the camp—and he works with children! He is gay!’ The rumors started up. He had a tough time then. His school appealed to the Moscow Education Office to give him the Outstanding Teacher award, but they were

refused twice. Because the high officials knew who the convicts were, you know. The Novosibirsk office may not know, but Moscow does!”

“In your experience, are the active and passive roles pretty set among gay men in Russia? I have heard people talk about this in interviews here.”

“You know, from what I can tell, from the observations I’ve made in my life, I don’t think a man is either active or passive. In my own experience, I wanted to be passive in the very beginning, I really did. But then I also wanted something else, something that an active partner feels. I am about eighty percent a passive type, but sometimes, sometimes your heart sets aflame, you fall in love, and you want to be with him in an active role. But then there are people that want to be passive always. Very few are only active. Gays are gays. What’s this, purely active, or purely passive? If he loves his own gender, of course he feels tenderness, he cares for the other guy!

“Some people live together as couples. But I always was a crazy one. I could live with my boyfriends but not as a couple.

“Now I don’t go out to the pleshki. I think it has become dangerous now. I do go to the theaters, by myself. Sometimes I meet a guy in the theater. But at the pleshki, they say there are mafia types, hooligans, they beat up the gay boys. I don’t go there anymore.

“It’s very nice to have steady boyfriends. You live as a couple. A lot of my friends value it. It’s just that we don’t seem to stay together. In the ‘70s, I knew a couple, old acquaintances of mine. They lived together for a very long time. They were thirty and had lived together for seven years by then. They had constant fights! They even went to the pleshki together to look around. They probably wanted others but what can you do when you live together?”

“Tell me what you hope for. What are your dreams for gays in Russia?”

“I want to clear up this issue of homosexuality! I would gladly subject myself all over again to all kinds of psychologists, astrologists, etc. just so they finally clear it all up. Homosexuality is natural to some people. Look at me! I was twelve when I already was openly gay! Nobody coerced me into being gay! It was natural to me. Maybe it does come from the heavens? You know they say Jesus Christ had boys. Look at him, all the pictures of him, always with boys! I even wrote a letter, in 1978, when several countries and important people got together to analyze the issue. Why always blame gays? It is so unfair, blame gays for who they are! Yes, no one needs to praise gays for being gay, but why put them down? How long can this go on?

“I would like that in Russia, and maybe my example can help. I wish the government would stop this endless harassment so that we

don't even feel safe anymore! Because it's even worse now. Before we had a special police force dedicated to homosexuality, but now we have to be afraid of bandits, hooligans, and others who have no limits. They cut off fingers to get the rings off, they beat your teeth out if you're gay. They feel they can do it. Horrible! One of our friends, a beautiful and intelligent person, got mugged in the toilet of a gas station. And the police started questioning the local gays! Gays won't do this! They don't kill! It's awful, scary now.

"If you look at it, ninety nine percent of gays are wonderful workers. But if you read the press, gays are humiliated and put down. Everyone needs to get together and clear this up!"

"What is your life like now, on the outside?"

"I don't go out much and cruise our meeting places. I get together with old friends, talk on the phone regularly with about five good friends who've known me for thirty years. You know, I had a heart attack a few years ago. They came to see me in the hospital, took care of me. That's how we live.

"After 1984 when I first got out I had some boyfriends, I can't live without them. Well, you know, I only like the younger men. I can't be with my peers. Sixteen, eighteen, twenty, not more than twenty-two-year-olds. Then, say, I meet one, feel attracted, and he tells me he's married. That's it. I just don't have any respect for the married ones. He could be young, interesting. I might get a little throb, maybe I want to talk to him, hang out, but—no.

"I have boyfriends—husbands, I call them—for five and six years. Yes, I have two husbands now. Since they got out of the army, they regularly come see me one after the other, once a month each. But you know, the last five years, even though it seems more open, it is actually cruder on the outside. There is more contempt, more insults. You know, something has changed. People are angry. Obviously, life is harder now for all, but we gays, are always somehow at fault! And for the young people today! Everything has suddenly become so accessible.

"I like public places, for example, the streetcar, the bus, and so on. I like having conversations with just about anybody. I ask this one young man, 'Do you know about gays?' He goes, 'Yeah.' This is typical.

"Would you like to meet one and sit down and have a conversation?"

"What? Are you gay or something?"

"No I'm just saying..."

"You know what, if you're gay, get lost."

"Before, people didn't talk like this. Maybe today you can have a conversation with about ten percent of the people. Other than that,

right smack in the jaw. There are nice young people too, but then there are the kind that come up to you and say, 'I heard you're gay. If you give me a bottle of vodka, I'll come see you.'

"I say to him, 'You know, honey, if I had a bottle for every one like you, there would be a line from here across the River Ob and right to the Opera House.'

"I had this other thing happen. A friend of mine found someone for me. I generally don't like this, very rarely do I do this. The guy comes over, he sits down, he says, 'What about a drink?' Well, I don't drink. I just don't drink. The stuff just kills me. I think, I can offer you a little drink, some vodka, cognac, a little wine, but only after we get acquainted, after we make out, and so on. But when they ask me right away for a drink, I open the door and say, 'Go on, forget it.'"

He hasn't told me anything about his childhood so I ask him about it. He doesn't seem tired of talking in the least. He looks like he could go on all night, loving every minute of it. Boris, who has been present during most of the interview, calls out that he has never even heard half of these stories before and is fascinated.

"I was born in 1941. Mother brought us up, all three of us. I didn't know my father. Mother worked in a warehouse. We all lived under one roof, fifteen families. It was a big place divided up into fifteen rooms by partitions, boards. I remember it was during my second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth grade. These fifteen families were then relocated. Three families went to a basement room. See this one-room apartment I have? In one room like this, three families lived. Mama, my sister and brother and me—I was the youngest—and two married couples, middle-aged couples. fourteen square meters, three families. Then the two couples got something else, and we became the sole inhabitants of the basement place, Mama and us three children. We lived there in the basement for forty years. We had windows like this."

As he demonstrates how high the windows were, the doorbell rings. Kuzmich smiles and gets up to answer it. After a short conversation, he returns and continues talking about his childhood.

"When I was six years old, Mama taught me the alphabet. You know, already at six and a half I was reading out loud, with expression. I liked to read and recite. The old ladies in the courtyard liked to listen to me; they'd ask me to recite something. In 1947 my grandmother died, I remember that very well.

"Now, when I was about ten, we played this little game. You know, children are children. Girls and boys are supposed to be friends, right, they are supposed to be playing around with their privates. With each other, of course. But I didn't want to. I wanted to see Valerka's, what kind he had. I simply didn't want any part of what Tanya had. I

didn't understand, but I just didn't like it. But Valerka, Sasha, Misha, I really wanted to see theirs. I even talked them into it. They'd say, 'What do you mean?' 'Come on, let's see it.'

"You know, we had a wooden outhouse near our building. There were little holes in it. Young guys would look in there when women went in. I would peek at the boys. This went on for two years.

"We had lofts next to our building. Summers we would sleep there. Yes, I remember it very well. I was twelve and a half. I really liked Vladka Osipov. Such a guy. He was pigeon-toed, but he had such a great pisser! He was 14—a year and a half older than me. And there he was! But what was he doing with his hand? He was doing something with his hand. I didn't realize he was masturbating. What was he doing? Later I figured it out. But then...

"I really fell for him—my first love. How was I going to get him into my bunk? He was a couple of lofts away. First there were the Kozlayev brothers, then Valerka, then Vladka, then Volodka. We were all about the same age. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen. But Vladka was the best. I really liked him. They were all a little off color by my standards, but he was not. He was the only one who called me Oleshka. They called me 'the proper young lady.' I was a little plump even though times were hard. I had these dimples. Still do, see? I'd smile and look at them. I was liked because I would recite verses and things and smile a lot. The babushkas liked me.

"So I said to Vladka one day, 'You know, you sleep alone and so do I, but you know I get so cold. Let's sleep together. Look at that loft over there. The Kozlayev brothers sleep together. It's much more fun. What's this being alone business?'

"He said, 'But Volodya and Valerka sleep alone too. Why not ask one of them?'

"'I just sort of want to be with you. We can talk. You can tell me stories.' He had a mother and a father and a brother, Vitya, five years older than him.

"He said, 'Okay, okay, Oleshka. Will you recite some poetry or something to me?'

"I said, 'Yes, of course, sure.'

"So he started coming over to my loft. Oh my goodness.

"We sit down and talk. Then we lie down. We're in our underwear. I'm trembling. And Vladka says, 'You seem really cold. What's the matter, Oleshka?' And he presses against me. I have my back to him. We're in bed and I'm lying down. He's pressing against my little butt. I'm shaking. I want something, but I can't imagine what. To feel him? My hand goes back there. Maybe after he falls asleep.

"Honest, I was already thinking about all this and I was only

twelve and a half years old.

"I'm wide awake and I go back there and he hits me on the hand: 'What are you doing?' I say, 'Oh, Vladka, just let me touch it!'

"Just go to sleep. Look what you did,' he says. 'I'm getting a hard-on because of you.'

"What do you mean, it was you who pressed against me!"

"How else are you going to warm up?"

"Come on,' I said. 'Let's do something. Let me touch you.' And I go back there and he says, 'Okay. All right.' I'm holding him by his sexual organ: 'You know, I saw you doing something like this to it one time.'

"He already had sperm, and he was only fourteen. He was about a year and a half older than me. I'm talking and remembering all this like it's happening right now.

"All right, okay. Let's not do that, how about if you just rub up against me, Oleshka.'

"All right, all right.' He goes up against me, comes against me. Then he says, 'Hold it, hold it! It's dangerous to sleep with you. You're so hot now!'

"Then I say to him, 'Vladka, come on. Well, what do grown-ups do about this stuff? Oh, come on! Let's try it.'

"I directed it. It was bliss, true bliss. Something I obviously wanted. It was nice and it hurt me—there was blood too. He was pretty careful. You know, kissing him, mouth to mouth, I said to him, 'Vladka, I love you. I like you a lot. Let's be together.' And I was only twelve and a half.

"He said: 'Don't you ever tell anyone about this.'

"Do you know? Before going in the army, for all those three and a half years, he was my first love, my only love. My first beginning, my first desire, my excellent desire. My whole life. And it's forty-two years ago exactly. I think about that, and I have a wonderful life because of it.

"For a year and a half I was faithful to Vladik. Then I turned fourteen and went to a vocational school. It was a difficult time. All we had was the gray army coats and belts they gave us there at the school. Of course, nothing fancy, but who cared? And they fed us! I was going to the school where Pokrishkin used to study, the Soviet hero. They even have a painting of the school and I was in the painting, standing and watching a workman operate a lathe. I won my first competition and got Laureate of Regional Folk Art at that school. I was the school orator! It was beautiful. I was fourteen and I started falling in love with others! I made close friends with several guys. There was more freedom then in a way. Yes, so I adore men. What can I do?"

“Were you baptized into the Russian Orthodox church?”

“No not as a child. In 1984 when I got out of the camp, Mama asked me—she too very rarely went to church, just once in a while —‘Oleshka, why don’t you go to church once? Light a candle to Nikolay the Servant, the Savior, the Miracle Worker, for all of us’ And so I went.

“I liked it so much, you know! It was some kind of church holiday, there was singing and a lot of people. It seemed so bright! I went in, asked where Nikolay the Miracle Worker was. They showed me. I lit a candle, didn’t make the sign of the cross or anything, even though I saw the other people do it. Yes, and then I come back home and tell Mama, ‘It was so nice.’

“She says, ‘Oleshka, so go there once a month.’ Now, eleven years later I still go there once a month! Today I went to church, lit a candle for the dead, left two biscuits, some candy, just took a moment there. Then I lit a candle to Nikolay the Miracle Worker, and the Savior, for all the living people before him.

“Three years ago I went with two friends and got baptized. And so it goes. Once a month I go to church, and it’s now five years that I go visit mama at the cemetery, once a month too. It’s all good. I think Mama is well there; she is not offended. You know, we Russians have this belief that if the person who passed away doesn’t come to you in your sleep then that person is okay, not offended or hurt by this world. And me, I’m lucky. Even though I think about Mama every day, she hasn’t visited me in my dreams so far! Even though I’ve become more sensitive now that I am older, teary sometimes, I can listen to a good old song. I grew up on old folk songs. I can start sobbing. Or watch an old movie too. I go visit Mama at the cemetery, go to church—and I am good for a month.

“Did you ever feel conflicted about your religion?”

“They say God loves all, right? I think he loves all and I think he loves me too. I really think so. See, I live well, and nothing really terrible, no real horrid problem has happened to me. Even though I’ve been through such hell, I am still okay.”

“Is there anything you want to add or say to people at the end of the interview?”

“What would I want? [He paused, smiled and lifted his eyes up dreamily.] To live freely, to be able to get together openly in some club. We’re all people in this world. I work as a superintendent in this building. We have the best building, the cleanest. I wake up at four in the morning and clean it up. When I walk the dog throughout the day, I pick up garbage and things, take care of the place. I clean. I love cleanliness. But I also want to live and relax among my own kind, our

people—to talk, to sit in a cafe, not in some closet. That's what I want, just one thing, an open society.

"I don't want people to point at me and say, 'Look he's gay.' I am gay, but I also work very hard. I give all I can. God knows, people love me. I read poetry aloud, they appreciate me, applaud—I give them all this, my talent. So what if I am different. I am not mean to anyone.

"Will I live until the day that happens? I will try to make it. Maybe I'll get a little invitation sometime, saying, 'Come to our club and cafe, a group of homosexuals are gathering together, an association of sexual minorities, and so on.' I would go with such pleasure! Just to relax, to have fun, to talk, to be with each other. That's what I want.

"I wish everyone health, happiness, and take good care of yourselves. Remember, our brother is a smart brother, a good person."

Tracy and I took some photos of Kuzmich in his apartment. The one of him smiling at the monkey with the banana was my favorite. I thought about the wealth of experience and wisdom in that apartment, and of Kuzmich's talent and openness, his optimism despite his trials.

During the interview, he showed me a couple of heterosexual pornographic German magazines he had: "I like to entice the boyfriends I invite over here with this." I smiled and he shrugged: "It's better than nothing. We don't have any real gay magazines." I had a few American ones at my apartment in Novosibirsk. I set them aside in a manila envelope for Kuzmich. The following week, busy working on another project, I called him to ask if he could possibly meet me in town, I had something to give him. He came to meet me: "I'm sorry, I can't stay long. I don't feel well." I gave him my present. He looked surprised and then thanked me profusely: "I never dreamed I would ever have anything like this."

Kuzmich died of a heart attack, at the age of 57, about two years after the interviews. "The stress of prison life," said Boris when he informed me.

In the Crimea

Here the water is clear, salty, and rejuvenating in early June. The mountain, awesome Kara Dag, is packed with clay and rock, crystals and stones strewn at its feet. Dark-blue Black Sea village of Koktebel comes out of the mist. Beloved Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva stayed in this place in 1910. “Armor that yields,” she wrote, inspired by women’s breasts, “I’m thinking of them. The single-breasted ones—of those girlfriends,” as she ambled over the same abundance of rocks on the beach, gazing at these same soft lines of the Bay of Koktebel, thinking of Amazons, where they walked. I am here too, many years later; there is no word for woman-spirit that is felt here.

My ancestral self feels coddled in Koktebel. Umbilical-cord seaweed, matriarchal flow. The Amazons and other women warriors actually lived around this part of the Black Sea for hundreds of years, in the mountains of the majestic Caucasus, and near the Sea of Azov. They were strong horsewomen, nomads, and survivors. I’m meeting their direct descendants here, in Koktebel.

An old Crimean Tatar town on the Black Sea, Koktebel, is now a popular Russian resort, called Planerskoye during Soviet times. It lies between the towns of Sudak and Feodosia, or ancient Theodosia, on the edge of the Crimean peninsula along the shore. Max Voloshin, a painter and writer who held literary salons in Sudak at the turn of the twentieth century, attracted Marina Tsvetaeva, Adelaida Gertsyk, Sophia Parnok, Andrey Bely, and Osip Mandelshtam, some of the best of that generation, to his dacha. It was a place of alternative relationships, of thinking creatively and of gender play. Voloshin’s mother loved to dress in men’s clothes. Aspiring to the feminine was a popular motif in those years among artists. An awareness of what masculine and feminine brought about the desire to somehow bring them together. Sophia, Sappho, “the eternal feminine,” Amazons inspired the poetry of the great Alexander Blok and in the philosophy of Romanov as well as some of the women artists of the times.

The mystique of the Amazons was connected with nomadic steppe tribes before the third century B.C. Originating in northern Turkey, these women roamed the steppes of Russia from the Altai Mountains in Siberia and crossed the mountains along Kazakhstan and even into the Ukraine and Crimea. The Scythians, a barbarian warrior tribe that dominated Russia, described the Amazons to Herodotus, the father of history. Over the years skeletons of warrior women have been found throughout Russia, evidence of a female tradition of warriors who were esteemed and equal to men and buried with reverence. Amazons flow through Greek literature, in the *Iliad*, in plays and in poetry and

further.

It was along this Black Sea coast that the ancient Greeks encountered the Amazons. Some say the Amazons are a myth, but a large number of stone statues of women (*kamennye baby* in Russian or *balbal* in Turkish) have been found along the steppes of Russia, the Ukraine and Central Asia. Possibly grave markers, they date from the third century and go on much later. The great rivers of the Eurasian continent—the Don, the Danube, the Dnieper—flow into the Black Sea, accounting for so much nomadic activity in the area. And what about the sea? Black Sea dolphins surely know all this history and yet greet us with their inimitable glee, their positive playful nature, modeling for us humans not to take things so seriously.

Approaching human settlement, I meet Tyotyа Katya (Auntie Katya) of the wavy long gray hair who hides almost every strand beneath the gray kerchief tied at the back of her neck. Blending in with weathered benches and trees, an Amazon of sorts, she owns the little shacks where I stay in Koktebel.

One day I stroll into the small dirt courtyard as she's unpinning her hair to dry. I catch her in a personal moment. She looks like my own wise woman—a tall, broad, gray-haired woman who appeared in a dream once when I needed inner wisdom and guidance. Katya's hair calls up this image of mine .

Katya walks with effort, bent over like a tree on a windy cliff, hip rotating her entire torso. My great aunt, who took care of me as a child, did this too, because her knee didn't work. So devoted to us children at a time when my parents were preoccupied with making ends meet, I love her and her place in my childhood.

Vacationers nonchalantly shuffle by in flip-flops toward the glistening sea, kicking up old dust. "Don't be bringing any men here," says Katya to me and several Moscow girlfriends who are also staying at the place. Readily agreeing to the terms, chuckling and nudging each other, they are undeclared lesbians, Amazons!

Another day I meet eighty-year-old artist Nina Vladimirovna Konovalova, who tells me like a seer that I've had a soul all along, something I never would have asked about, but somehow she addresses me with what I most need at that moment. Waving her hands about, she gazes at me earnestly as we stand in her front yard beside a table covered with large rocks laid out in a circle, meaningfully.

"Physical love doesn't matter," she blurts out, and then, leaning toward me, "You know, there are lesbians walking about in Koktebel" Breaking off, she looks at me, a bit chagrined. Odd to hear the word lesbian from her, a word not used much in Russia at all, especially by eighty-year old women in villages. Does she know about me, and the

others?

She invites me into her studio, kept cool by window shades. Artifacts, photographs, and paintings crowd the room. All the same it has a feathery quality. She seats me at a large table and introduces me to her watercolors, one by one—pale, delicate, magical. When we finish, she tucks them all under a blanket on the bed. To rest.

A few evenings later I'm asleep when I feel the earth quake. I am shaken awake. My first thought: Is everyone okay in San Francisco? Then: What about Katya, Nina Vladimirovna, and all the rest in Koktebel? Are they running, scattering like horses, not knowing which way to go? Spiral swirls inside me and around me, lullaby, some ancient dream pulls me back to sleep.

In the morning, I find there's been no quake. Nina Vladimirovna explains: "Sometimes people feel those tremors here. The mountain Kara Dag is close to the earth's heart. But there will be love."

I look at the bright hot sun outside offering hope. "Love of the highest kind," she assures me. "You need complete trust in yourself, and in God."

The dream passes through my mind like a movie. Love converges, far and near—a glass of water, a dog's wet nose. Stern-faced Amazons arrive on their handsomest horses, letters from San Francisco arrive in Moscow buxom with love, and Russian friends nourish me with understanding. Our stories emerge quietly, merging in harmony, in herstory.

Journal: June 17, 1992

on the train to Feodosia, two days earlier

Chugging through the Ukraine, now a foreign land to the Russians. Onward to the Crimea, a land still in dispute (Russian? Ukrainian?). It's very hot. I have an itch or some allergy on my hands. I hope it goes away soon. The train is pretty filthy, which doesn't help.

We cross the Oka River and pass Tarusa, where Marina Tsvetaeva's family had a dacha in her childhood. Marina, my favorite Russian poet, was an innovator, a bold poet and word crafter, and interested in women. She wrote about women and longing and many other subjects in a prose piece called "Letter to an Amazon," written in French when she was down and out in Paris, thinking of the love she had for Sophia Parnok, an open lesbian devoted to women all her life.

I am dozing as the train rocks gently, but it is awfully hot and we keep trying to open our compartment window. With an open window everything gets covered in dust, others object. It's a no-win situation. I

read Tsvetaeva's poems about love and death. I read the "Girlfriend" (*Podruga*) poems:

How you grabbed my head
And caressed every curl,
How the flower on your little
Enamel brooch cooled my lips.

How I brushed my sleepy cheek
Against your slender fingers,
How you teased me like a boy,
How you liked me that way...

I truly miss the Siberian girls and the Trans-Siberian trip. This trip with Olga, a Moscow friend I've been staying with, cannot compare. Oddly inept at something so common as a train ride, Olga is almost nervous. Her hippie-like, devil-may-care style doesn't fit. I sound critical. No, honestly, Muhabat, my Uzbek friend in St. Petersburg, has said to me, "Olga is a person who just doesn't care about other people."

Olga and I have a discussion about feminism. She believes that the development of feminism in Russia will be different from that in the U.S. because women in Russia do not see patriarchy as the oppressor. The totalitarian system has been so dominant and women were part and parcel of that from the beginning. I couldn't understand—did she believe there was no patriarchy in Russia? Then who was in charge of the country?

"But the change will come," Olga declared, "whether I push for it or not."

I thought about my own commitment to socialist politics. I remember how many years I seemed to beat my head against the wall to make things happen, to convince people of women's rights, of workers' real and potential power, of capitalism's decline. Did it help the struggle? Now I was learning to listen. I could say nothing about how the Russians could or should change things. There's no prescription.

Olga talked about how vital Moscow was to the gay movement...a laboratory. "The Siberians can't participate in our movement. It's just different for them. Moscow is the center." Was she being elitist? I had heard this kind of thinking before—"the provinces" were secondary or even tertiary to the great capital. Yet Siberia had many large cities! She didn't seem to have a concept of grassroots organizing, of involving people, of building alliances. "The movement is underground now." She speaks and I don't argue.

People are sleeping in their berths most of the time because of the heat. It's a long ride, twenty-five hours. The scenery is idyllic—rolling green hills, trees swishing by. In our second-class compartments, *kupe*, the berths are perpendicular to the window and about six feet long; however, in third class, or *platzkart*, the berths are parallel to the window and there are no separate compartments. You hear everyone's grunting and snoring in *platzkart*.

Our compartment has individual reading lights on the window side of the compartment and baskets above each berth for things you might need to access during the ride. I keep my toiletries, diary, and dictionary there. There is also a towel rack and another rack and two hooks to hang clothes. Even a heater, for the winter cold. A large storage space above the doorway holds large bags or other objects. One of the people in our compartment is a young man on a bicycle tour of the Crimea. He hoisted his bike up there.

The center of the compartment is the communal table. Riders put food and teacups on it, and everyone takes turns eating and keep their utensils separate; we sometimes share food. People also use it to write on or just lean on as they gaze out the window. I find a bottle for the three nearly dead daisies Olga's friend brought when she saw us off. They are precious as they struggle for life, bobbing their heads up, petals spreading out with glee.

There are more families on this trip than usual, people going to the Crimea for vacation. I feel safe, and the men are not lonely soldiers or single drunks. In the corridors, children chatter cheerily, rolling their r's in Russian, as their mothers try to keep them quiet.

During the night, lots of bouncing from the tracks, familiar groan of the train when it leaves a station after a stop, I wake up feeling cold and put on my T-shirt. Amazing to trust strangers so much that I can sleep nude in a compartment with two people I don't know at all. I know Russians do it all the time.

The young man hasn't interacted much with us during the trip; the other stranger, an older woman is a seasoned traveler because of her work and she particularly loves train travel. "With airplanes you have to wait and wait and wait and then you're there too quick. You don't experience the landscape or the transition time." She has even traveled to the far north of Siberia, Norilsk, where one's hair can freeze at night from the cold. "But I never stopped to see Lake Baikal in my travels," she says.

Posing as a Latvian to avoid the attention that comes with being an American, I almost pass but she doesn't quite believe it. When the woman casually questions me about some current political problem in Riga she is familiar with, I avoid answering. I tell her I haven't been back there in a year. I feel badly about deceiving her.

Not caring one way or the other, she smiles. “I enjoy talking to people on the train. It’s a long comfortable space of time to get to know someone.”

Olga laughs at my mistakes in Russian, which embarrasses me. I call the beautiful fields of red poppies we are passing *myaki* instead of *maki*, the correct word. When I explain that her laughing bothers me, she laughs even more. I am especially ashamed in front of the woman I’ve been speaking to, Lyuda. I don’t know why because I’ll never see her again.

I keep longing for the girls, Lena and Asya, realizing that I keep comparing this trip with my Trans-Siberian trip. I wake up from dozing and notice Lyuda napping across from me. Ruefully I find I am on a different trip—with this Olga.

The poppies are of many colors, their black centers barely visible, still whizzing by. Also there are some blue-violet, lilac-like flowers. And silver trees—are they willows? We pass the Sea of Azov, and a large sign saying “Krym” (The Crimea) appears. We are getting close.

We three women in the compartment chat on about travel, life, poetry, ethnic cultures. Lyuda is an economist for the government. She talks of the deterioration of the Communist Party, the loss of members, the dashing of ideals. What a confusing time this must be for so many people in Russia!

I could relate her confusion to the fall of Tito’s Yugoslavia and maybe my own loss of idealism. I think of the man who came to visit my mother when we were vacationing a few years ago in her hometown on the island of Krk. He arrived in a green uniform. They were old friends from before the Yugoslav Revolution, when Mother was a teenager in the early years of World War II and a Partisan sympathizer.

“I quit the Party,” I overheard him say. “It’s just not the way it was when we were young, so much corruption and betrayal.” He was older than my mother, perhaps in his early sixties. A lifetime he was regretting? My mother was never very involved.

When we arrive, Olga and I take a taxi from Feodosia to the village of Planerskoye, its name soon to be changed back to Koktebel. Chatting with the driver through rolling hills, I make out warm salty sea smells, even with two people in the cab smoking. He informs us the original name will soon return to all the signs. We arrive at a small dirt-road bus station, the center of town. We make our way down the road to a place Olga has reserved for us by mail.

A white gate opens into a dumpy garden. A child is crying somewhere, a grandmother wandering around staring into space and shouting at times. The man who lives there is soft-spoken and sweet. Olga has known him for years. He says they didn’t expect us until

tomorrow and shows us the room apologizing. We walk through a smelly, fly-filled, messy kitchen to a small curtained-off room with three single hospital beds. They are topped with stained, worn, bare mattresses. I expected primitive, but this is grubby. The only bright spot is a lovely lace-curtained window with a box of flowers.

We go for a walk while the man and his wife clean up. As we walk toward the beach discussing the possibility of finding another place, I see an American-looking rainbow cap and point it out to Olga. We walk toward it and see people we know—Kapa and with her, Ira. I don't remember Kapa from the 1991 conference (which is where I met Olga), but Ira was my first interviewee there. Quite an amazing coincidence this far away in the Crimea!

We hug. With her hair bleached by the sun and her face red, Ira's light blue eyes stand out even more. She is excited about the place they are staying in and wants to show us. We all go there. On a cliff overlooking the beach, facing the spectacular mountain Kara Dag, the place is cluttered but homey. There are a few little shacks and two outhouses further off. White washbasins line benches under overgrown trellises, sun shines on clothes hanging from a line, a chicken hurries across our path, a black cat stares at us from the picnic table. There's a sweet smell and a light sound of birds chirping. I know I want to stay here. Ira shows us her room and urges us to join her and her friends here. "I think those are empty. It would be so much fun to be together," she pleads.

We approach an older woman sitting in a chair, a small old dog at her side. Her hair is wrapped up in a big gray kerchief. Her name is Katya. Olga asks if she has room for us. First she says no, then she asks: how many nights? Five.

"We are friends of Ira and the others," Olga explains as a reference. They have been there a few days already so she must know they are okay.

"No, it's too much trouble. It's hot," she complains. "And I have to clean up after you and all. And only five nights? It's not worth it." She waves us away. Olga offers to clean up and do what needs to be done. Katya shakes her head. "I'm worn out from working, I just can't."

She looks at each of us. "There are two beds at the end there, but the place needs to be cleaned up, I don't know if you'd like it. Do you want to see?" We nod.

She rises with effort, her back doesn't straighten up and her right leg doesn't bend at the knee. We follow her swaying body. We come to a lean-to, like something out of *Robinson Crusoe*. One bed at the entry, and then a curtained doorway to a small, whitewashed hut big enough for another double bed. A small window pierces one of the

walls. It is cool and cozy.

“Yes,” we say in unison. She complains some more but reluctantly lets us have it. “Don’t be bringing any men here. I don’t want any trouble.” We agree and rush off to get our things from the other place.

I set myself up in the back hut. We sweep and make the beds. I hang Marina Tsvetaeva’s picture on one wall and a typed copy of “Eagle Poem” by Joy Harjo on the other. I am in a womb in that room. Olga’s outer room seems like outdoors but with a covering. On the wall hangs a colorful needlepoint maiden in a frame. We are in a womanly place.

We have our own picnic table at the edge of the cliff overlooking the glimmering beach. A well provides water, and basins are filled according to one’s needs—one for washing clothes, one for dishes, one for washing oneself. One of the cottages is a small communal kitchen. An outhouse stands beyond the main house. Next door to us are a woman and her daughter from Kiev. Again I try to pass as a visitor from the Baltic so as not to attract attention.

I meet Ira’s friends—Faya, her lover, and Kapa, her roommate in Moscow. They’ve befriended three other women also from Moscow—Lyulya, Natasha, and Sveta. They drink beer, smoke, and play cards at the picnic table. We chat for a while, then Olga and I go for a walk. The air is wonderful and clean. Goats bleat on the hillside. The bay before us changes color in concert with the sky.

Sirens were mythical feminine creatures in the Black Sea, women with the wings of birds. Circe warned Odysseus of their seductive songs. She said Odysseus could only listen to their songs if his men tied him firmly to the mast as they passed the Sirens. He gave his men balls of wax to stick in their ears so that the songs would not seduce them. Others were seduced by these wonderful birds who flew to lure adventurers. I wonder what I am doing in the Crimea—something beyond mere vacationing has drawn me. I know there is more than the physical to being a lesbian but here I feel it and experience the connection with ancient and beyond-human women.



Olga introduces me to Nina Vladimirovna Konovalova, the artist. She has a garden of rocks in the middle of her courtyard. Her living quarters are in one hut and her studio in the other. We stand outside talking at first. I remember her rambling on about God and spirituality, uttering phrases I find significant in my fragile state, away from home, traveling with the odd, controlling Olga. Nina Vladimirovna looks up at me and says something about lesbians walking around Koktebel.

Catching herself, she pauses. Did I smile, did she say something she meant not to? She takes me into the studio. There in the cool, fresh, delicate atmosphere of creativity, she introduces me to her paintings, like they are like people, children; then she tucks them into bed again.

That night, not feeling well, I go to sleep even though Olga and the rest want to party. I go to my little shack and lie down. I am awakened by Olga looking for something. She has her own room. She says she “wants me” and crawls into my bed, touching me. I tell her no. She doesn’t stop. I begin to feel violated. I tell her to get away.

The same night I wake up feeling an earthquake. The shaking feels real. I’m scared and think of friends back in San Francisco, then of horses running. Some ancient time rushes in, as if the earth is opening and the layers of history in the Crimea are flipping by, a vertical shaft in the earth that opens back to Amazon times.

I go to Konovalova in the morning. She looks surprised, as if I came when she was about to call me, but she has no phone and neither do I. Wanting to tell her about the earthquake, she stops me and says she has something for me. She brings out a painting I haven’t seen, sharp and vivid, compared to her pale pastels of the sea. A stormy feeling, clouds hovering, sea reddish with the rising sun, and Kara Dag too, with distinct black lines showing its jaggedness, and fields growing with restlessness—a wildness is captured.

“It’s for you. It’s called *Anxiety*. (*Trevoga*).” I read what she has written on the back of the painting. “All this will pass.” And then, “To the dear person from a faraway land—Sonja Franeta—from Konovalova, Nina Vladimirovna. With deep respect and warmth. Thank you for your tender feelings for me and for my home. 19.7.92. Konovalova” I thought of the Little Prince.

“It was made for you. I know it. It’s yours,” she says She has understood subconsciously my troubles with Olga, my yearning to explore what is not physical right now. We communicate, like unspoken feminine spirits or ancestors, on some other plane. I am relieved, I feel taken care of, like the paintings under those covers. I am assured about this place—Marina Tsvetaeva brought her beloved Sophia Parnok here so long ago for a reason, Katya, Nina Vladimirovna. I too came here for a reason, that is not meant to be known, only felt.

<i>Desire</i>

Sappho nurtured women
Her lyre turned love to lyrics
Words, even feelings, fail me
And my angels’ voices are violins.

Flowers for Sveta

*For Svetlana Barabanova (Svetlana
of the Drum) 1940–2006*

Long-striding woman of twinkling eyes,
Sveta is no more.
 Dirty, ugly death, no she did not
 Want to lie down with dirty death

Another day to see Tarkovsky's *Andrey Rublev*
 To dance to Edith Piaf, to try out her Spanish
 Another week to go to Mayakovsky Square
 And watch pretty girls go by.

The older you grow, said Woolf of all people,
 The more you want to hang on to life,
 Sveta tried to punch and beat death.
 The ring is empty, the lights low.

In youth, her man taking his life and her with him
 going down from a building, dragging her
 like a rag doll through a window,
 But no, dirty death had no use

For her then, a scar on her nose for life.
 At 65, when cancer was destroying her,
 Glass case, pearls, little tiger with necklace,
 photos. Facing fewer days.

Moaning like a cat, turned over by one and another.
 Ugly pain ruled that room, her once jolly face,
 Contorted. Diaphanous curtains billow
towards us.

Room puffs up with memories of
Sveta.

Years ago cooking in Sveta's kitchen. I stand by her.
(A wooden Virgin Mary my mother would say in Croatian)
Sveta's puppy dog eyes roll. Gazing up at foot-higher me
 Why are you just standing there like a dylda?
Dildo? Did I hear right? She said it again. *Kak dylda*

A gawky doll, a do-nothing. But I heard *dildo*.
Her limp look turns to smile, then deep guffaw.

My dear friend Sveta urged me to finish my book—
First finish one project and then on to the next—
Painstakingly transcribing the interviews, she watches me
Throw my hands up. She helps construe, unravel words.
Rozovye Flamingo done and flying, crescendo drum roll.

My cat Butterfly at the dacha, Sveta sneaks him
treats,

Fishtail bigger than his cat head—*he'd scarf it down!*
Shaking my head: *Too big!* Chewing and chewing.
Spellbound. Then down the hatch, before our eyes!
Sveta, light as light: *I know what he likes.*

Poises my poem on the 25 *rublyovka* (the number in Russian
A mouthful. Always correcting me. Never could get 'em
right.)

Tall slender antique cabinet she and Lena got for 25 rubles.
Top and bottom separated with four-foot space for dishes,
“After Church,” in English, Russian and Spanish hung.
Perfect, said Gertrude and Alice, till the dacha died—

Dacha dining, a meal is not a meal without black
bread.

Preparing, eating, talking, assembling. Teapot on
alert.

Coffee rituals, scrabble-game playing it their way,
Arguing fine points of words—Russian, English,
French,

Now Spanish. Any word would do. News of my
interviews,

Debates about coming out of the closet—what a
concept

In Russia. Sveta's family—Lena, Ksiusha, Vitya, woman-man.
French translators together in Moscow, she and Lena
adjusted

To the conditions: anti-Semitism, affairs, never naming any
intimacy.

Like trees growing among obstructions.

Nothing can stop a drum in a parade.

One day I miss my train at the dacha.
Random cancellation, Russian trains betray.
No reschedule, no concern for customers!
Back at the dacha, I'm in tears: *What'll my students do?*
They're waiting and I can't even call. Dacha phone service—
Sporadic, like everything. So Sveta, in all her brilliance,
Her most reassuring songlike alto announces: *A bath!*
Everything will be alright, nye plach (don't cry), calm down.

A bath, a shower, right here, in the garden. It'll calm you.
Feel good, rejuvenate you. I glance at the workman, laying
brick
Nowhere else to shower? Drum roll
Nowhere, but the garden. *I'll just tell him not to turn around.*

A shower out in the open air surrounded by bushes, trees,
Flowers? Oppressive day, away! Dry my tears.
Chort s nim. (To hell with him) Logistics? She'll do it
—

While I dawdle, like a true *dylda*.

Not long later, back with a well water bucket, hot kettle
Shampoo and cigarette dipping from her lips, I
undress,
Hang things on bushes. Check Arkady's not peeping.
And there among fragrance, royal green, and warm
air

Sunny Sveta bathes me, showers me, just the right amount
Of kettle water and well water, all in artistic
nurture,
Most glorious shower of my life, Sveta's
love and flair
Her lionhearted spirit, watering
and soaping me,
Like I am her precious child.



Lena (l.) and Sveta (r.) at the dacha

Meeting Shamans

Almost every human group has had some form of shamanism. Shamans believe that their souls, their spirits, leave the body, travel long distances, and have encounters with other spirits. You can do this traveling in a trance state or in a dream state. When I'm trancing and if my familiar, my totem animal, my nagual, is a jaguar, then in this other body I become the jaguar. I become the serpent, I become the eagle. I have this visionary experience where I'm flying in the sky as an eagle—a she eagle maybe.

Gloria Anzaldua

Yangpans (shamans' belts with hanging amulets), drums, images of deities, robes—these were all destroyed during the anti-shaman campaign in the Soviet Union. Shamans were whisked away to prisons beginning in the 1930s when anyone could be Stalin's enemy, and as part of a larger campaign against religion—the opium of the masses. Investigators came to the villages to liquidate shamans. Often people didn't know what happened to their healers. Older men or women were simply taken away because they were respected elders in a community and possibly shamans. Some shamans disappeared, it was said, turning into birds or other animals and leaving the human realm; others took on different genders. Shamans were thought to be uncivilized and counterrevolutionary, associated with a primitive lifestyle. Native peoples who lived with their own traditions were being forced to live the new way. Then came perestroika, and some descendants or practitioners wanted to practice shamanism again.

In 1993 in Kiev, I met a man who explained himself to me as a shaman painter. He took me to a museum and showed me figurines that had small points of entry, piercings in the clay, holes at various symmetrical locations on the body. A small ancient female clay figure's perforations, like chakras, he said, were the connecting points between the spirit world and the material world. Dreams are those links too. "There is much we do not know on a scientific level," he said.

In 1995, I met a woman shaman in Tomsk, in Central Siberia. My friend Sergey, my collaborator on a gay project, wanted me to meet

her, so we went. Not wanting to slip on the ice, we walked arm in arm along the snow-covered streets to a cupola-crowned church. He led me into a forested area with no roads in the middle of Tomsk, a kind of park.

Tomsk attracted me, not only because of the wonderful people I met through our work, but because of the old, intricate, wooden architecture of many houses and buildings still standing. The park we strolled in was like a snowy, pillowy oasis in the city. The old wooden houses and drifts of snow, huddled around the park, with a little creek running through and a hill coming up out of nowhere—it all seemed like a fairy tale transporting us to another level of existence. As he was telling me about Efimia, the shaman, we encountered gates with her name drawn by hand, in a Russian Orthodox style, very old, otherworldly. I snapped a photo.

Before a small wooden hut ahead, a woman in a kerchief was clearing snow from the path with a shovel. She smiled warmly and laughed, straightening her cream-colored kerchief. It was Efimia. I asked if I could take a picture of her just like that, all bundled up with her big shovel.

She invited me into her house; uneven wooden stairs went up to the next floor, where a door opened into the living quarters, very spare and clean, with the atmosphere of a church—incense, wooden benches lining walls, icons, burning candles. What kind of shamanism was this?

I began perusing the icons hanging separately on the clean white walls. Efimia walked around to explain the icons to me, telling longer stories about a few of them. She gave a detailed account of one saint, Thekla, I think, who was a prostitute. After going to the desert as a kind of penance, she kept running into the same man over a period of many, many years. She became a saint, but as Efimia maintained, a very independent woman. Efimia also admired St. Catherine who was condemned to death on the a wheel.

“Catherine managed to break the wheel, but no one knows how,” said Efimia. “She tried to convince the emperor to stop murdering Christians, but she herself got beheaded. Why did they do all this torture like the Soviets? I don’t know. The ones who survived were ultimately killed because they tried to stand up to the torturers, but their spirits are here, these great women.” She indicated them with her palm up as she turned around slowly. The icons were golden, finely painted and hung in dignity in a straight line across four white walls. All were women.

“I believe in a mixture of Orthodoxy and shamanism,” Efimia went on. “These saints are very important to me, but not to the church. I don’t go into the church. They chase me out. They hate

women. I don't. I love women and my own independence. So it's a mix, what I believe."

I was curious. She probably knew I was interested in women as a feminist, but maybe not that I was a lesbian. Russians are not very direct about such things.

Her daughter, Anastasia, about fourteen, dark-skinned with wide eyes, had been sitting in an armchair in the adjoining room. She had an almost Middle Eastern look; maybe she was Azeri or of some Caucasian descent. Her black eyebrows and long black hair topped a reticent smile. I said hello. She looked down shyly. Efimia told me she was studying English and urged her to say something to me, but she looked away.

I asked Efimia more about shamanism and said that I was not a believer in it or in any religion. She told me about how she had arrived at this point in her life, how she had learned things. "There are skills we can all learn and develop," she said. I didn't know shamanism was a craft. I just knew it was linked with traditions of small native groups mostly in Central Asia and the Far East or North.

"People were forbidden to practice shamanism and even imprisoned or killed," said Efimia. "People had been persecuted through the ages for following psychic ideas, and this had to do with male political control and power. Who was controlling the Soviet Union and Russia even in tsarist times? Men."

While her primary work was sensing people's auras and chakras, she had also studied Western thought and Orthodoxy. "The church would never allow a woman to be a priest, but here I am, a kind of priest, a shaman."

She used vibrations and sound for healing. Being a healer, a shaman, an independent woman—all this was anathema, not only to the Soviets but to the Russian Orthodox Church. I found it strange that she seemed so firmly rooted in Russian Orthodoxy.

She suddenly asked if I wanted to learn how to make *pilmeny*, which she said was a Siberian dish that was a Ukrainian import because of all the kulaks and other prisoners who were sent to Siberia during Stalin's bloody reign. Sergey, who had been keeping himself in the background, caught my eye and nodded. I knew he was referring to a previous conversation we'd had about the anti-kulak campaign. Kulaks were a richer class of peasants, and one of Stalin's first oppressive acts in 1929 was to liquidate this class. This was the very reason Sergey was in Tomsk. His grandfather was a kulak from the Ukraine. His whole family was deported to Siberia to develop the agriculture of the countryside. Some kulaks were killed while others were forced to move. Thus did the Ukrainian *pilmeny* become a Siberian dish.

“Sure, I love to cook,” I said. As I passed Anastasia’s room to go downstairs, I saw big posters of Michael Jackson and other stars on her wall by the bed. It seemed so incongruent with the talk of shamanism and the kulaks. Downstairs we washed up, taking turns pouring water from a bucket on one another’s soapy hands over a large sink with no faucet.

Efimia made the dough, cut and rolled the pieces. We took balls of ground meat, put them in the center of the rolled-out pieces, then stretched the ends of the dough, folding it over the meat and pinching the two sides together. She taught me the art of forming the little dumplings into curved half-moon shapes while she talked about her shamanistic self.

She said again that the shaman’s ways of healing were acquired skills. This intrigued me. I liked that she did not dwell on the metaphysical. I wondered if she was trying to convince me of her legitimacy or shamanism’s, or if she just want to be friends? She boiled the *pilmeny* and we sat down with Sergey to eat them with sour cream, a culinary delight.

I enjoyed her lightness, laughter, and stories. I began to trust her. She shared her life path, her love for English, and her attraction to California. “In a previous life I was a California Indian,” she added. She had shown me her vocal range in the middle of making the *pilmeny*.

“You can learn this, just as I did. The voice is a wonderful instrument to learn to use,” she said. Maybe I would someday.

She told me she was part Ukrainian and part Polish, “beautiful people those Poles, don’t you think?”

In contrast to the quiet and orderly upstairs room, the downstairs was cold, with lots of utensils and other things strewn about, very lived-in but primitive, with no running water. The toilet was outside, an outhouse. She loved her house and had bought it two years ago, she said. “We can stay pretty warm when the wood stove gets going.” It was so Russian, rudimentary and bare, reminiscent of a small isolated village that was lost in another time, a time before the Revolution and electricity.

After we ate, I asked her if I could speak to her privately. Sergey had suggested that I ask her for a reading, but I had been doubtful. Now I felt comfortable enough to do this, and she was quite amenable. We went upstairs to her spare, clean room. She sat on a chair, and I on her couch. She looked at me. I got right to it: “Why am I having such trouble finding a special person in my life? I mean a partner.” She nodded: “A close person.” I said yes. It was like therapy but not really. She closed her eyes and asked me not to cross my legs or my arms. I closed my eyes too. We sat in silence for about five minutes.

She asked me if my father was a Serb, and I said yes, he was born in Montenegro. (I hadn't mentioned this before and I didn't think Sergey could have told her either.) A few moments later she said with a tone of certainty, "The curse comes from your grandmother, your father's mother. She had some troubles and sorrows. Something happened. I see a burning house. Troubles began after this."

Not very specific, I thought. I waited and went with the flow. She asked about my father. "He was in the Nazi camps," I said. She told me her grandfather too was in the Nazi camps: "When he came back to the *Soyuz* [the Soviet Union], to the Ukraine, he was put in prison for being part of the army of [General] Vlasov, who had suddenly become an enemy of the people. Can you believe it?"

I asked what happened. "Fortunately my grandfather got out after only two years in the Soviet camp due to some help our family enlisted. But he became very cruel and mean after these experiences. My grandmother said he was a completely different man after he got out of prison."

"My father too." I said.

"I know," she said. "That's why I told you the story."

How did she know? And what an amazing coincidence—two prisoners, my father, her grandfather, from two different places and situations, yet prison made them both cruel, or perhaps mentally ill.

I had been told my father was a charmer in Germany before he was sent to the camp, a happy-go-lucky man. Afterwards he was suspicious, angry, and oppressive with our family. A great storyteller and a flirt, yet his dark side was a puzzle.

I asked Efimia if she thought my problems with relationships stemmed from his concentration camp mentality or his sufferings there.

"No," she said firmly. "It's the curse from your grandmother that caused your father's unhappiness and his own fate and all that came after in your family. Do you have brothers and sisters?"

I said I had two sisters and a brother and that my youngest sister died when she was very young, eighteen, already many years ago.

After a few moments she smiled. "I will try to lift the curse from you." She closed her eyes and meditated for several minutes. I too closed my eyes, and something started to appear to me. At first I saw a form in the darkness on the inside of my closed lids, then there was clearing and a lighter color. I hoped in my heart that the curse was lifted.

I began to think of how members of my family, including myself, had been in severe car wrecks—all except my father. Was this part of the curse? And my sister's death in a car wreck too?

To continue to lift the curse after we finished, Efimia gave me a

tape to listen to and a candle ritual to follow. "At home, when it is quiet and you are about to go to bed, light a candle and get a glass of water, put on the music, the tape. Be sure to play side one before you play side two, and never play side two without one. You can play side one by itself, if you wish. After the music is over, drink the glass of water and lie down quietly." I did this once after the session when I was back in my place in Novosibirsk, but perhaps not exactly according to the instructions. I would try again.

"I want to tell you what I see in your future," she said. "You will meet a man in a little over a year, in January or February, and he will be yours." She looked at me and smiled. Sergey hadn't told her.

"What if I prefer being with women?" She looked at me for a moment, and closed her eyes again. "No it will be a man," she confirmed. Then she smiled again and said, "I like men." Her own prejudice was affecting the reading, I thought. Maybe she saw a gender variance that she couldn't explain, a "butch" affect that convinced her the woman she saw was man. I tried to imagine myself with a man, but I knew it had to be a woman. Shamans were human, not beyond prejudice.

Earlier in the day Efimia had told me how she much she love the English language and had recited a poem by Shakespeare for me. She really adored Shakespeare, but she and her daughter didn't have many books in English. Anastasia wrinkled her eyebrows and said she didn't think they had any Shakespeare in English, only in Russian. I wanted so much to give them a book of Shakespeare and made a note to send them one.

"The man" who came into my life that January was Leslie, a woman; we were a couple for eight years. She was part of my path but not the person I could settle down with.

The curse of the burning house may have been lifted. I continued to do some healing work around my great-grandmother, then my grandmother: the idea was to hold them and wish upon them everything they needed and wanted so they would be happy and content, satisfied and secure. Through this work, the matrilineal line through my father and then to me was accepted, loved and healed.

I played Efimia's tape one more time much later when I was back home in California and was surprised to hear so many references to the devil and lifting his evil work from one's life, very Orthodox Christian. Efimia's singing, which I recalled from the *pilmeny* making, resembled Christian chanting. I wondered what to do next. I found myself drawn to music and its healing power and learned to play the violin and to sing. My writing continues to guide me. Healing has come through these pursuits.

I don't know if I met a real shaman. The word shaman comes

from the language of the Tungus (or Evenki), people in the far north of Asia and Russia. The use of the term in the world today, some Evenki say, is not related to the very specific role of the shaman in their culture as intermediary between the physical world and the spirit world. Their word belongs to their culture. I simply had a wonderful experience with a woman in Tomsk who called herself a shaman, and I learned something about the spirit world—that there are ways, not always explicable in human terms in which we and the living and nonliving things move through existence.

Smitten with Lyuba

I was smitten with Lyuba. I loved her adventurous and playful spirit, our conversations, her enthusiasm—and her tall, responsive body. She sat up in bed on the last day of visiting me in Novosibirsk, her slender frame slightly hunched, as she animatedly expressed her attitude toward sex. “The older I get the better it gets,” she said. “And the older I get the more I want to give [*otdat’* in Russian]. Do you know what I mean?” Her long eyebrows soared, her mouth curled around those Russian words, just as I remembered her at work in her dubbing booth.

“The complexity seems to increase,” I said. And we agreed that we wanted not just the orgasm or the sex itself but the tenderness, the tension, the sense of humor, the sequence of everything, the inexplicable tears and laughter.

Talking in bed after sex was always part of my imaginings of being with women. Wrapping my legs around Lyuba, in all our nakedness, sharing how good it felt after uncontrollable groans and flying glides of passion together, we are vulnerable, trusting each other with our desires, knowing and voicing them, reaching for that deepest nook. Exploring with the utmost kindness that warm, moist vaginal cave, fingers growing more sensitive with every thrust. We hold each other, talk, and share like there is no tomorrow, just here and now.

I think of Lyuba’s face in the minivan taxi as she left the morning after her visit, only her smile visible under her classic Roaring Twenties black hat, a smile of assurance, hinting at our kisses and caresses. She refused to grieve our parting because it was a joyful thing that we met and interacted, no matter what the future would hold. She said it was the absolute best: “I never knew it could be that way.” When we made love, we sensed each other acutely, knowing what we needed. In tune, in the best sense of the word. Everything was completely okay, not awkward, even asking how she wanted it. My tentative words in Russian. Yes, it was both hard and terribly easy to express all I wanted to say.

What did all this mean, this love, satisfaction, and trust? I wanted to write her and see her again, and yet it was not serious. She had a family that she had no intention of leaving, and I did not want to live full-time in Russia. What would happen? What was the point of agonizing and longing for one another? We wrote letters and some emails. I called her from California. We rendezvoused a few more times over the next two years—once in Novosibirsk and a return trip to Tomsk, a romantic trip to St. Petersburg, and then the unexpected

disastrous last meeting in Moscow.

I first met Lyuba in Tomsk when I was working on an unusual project. Deep in central Siberia, Tomsk had been a closed city during Soviet times, with factories and secret technological and scientific activity and an important nuclear power plant nine miles away. A drab city yet one of the oldest in Siberia, its unique charm lay in the number of beautiful ornate wooden buildings. An old Siberian university town, it had lots of young people around. I went there to organize a queer film festival, the Pink Flamingo Film Festival—code words to the gay and lesbian community. We non-locals were given an old steel ship on the Tom River as our hotel. The ship was normally used by the Ministry of Culture to access some of the remotest places in Siberia to bring entertainment and culture. Sergey, who I interviewed for my book, was the main organizer of the festival in Tomsk. He got the agreement of the Tomsk Minister of Culture for our “American” festival. We had even thought about bringing our queer festival to some of the outer posts the ship was used for, but reportedly it was not ready to make such a journey.



This odd mélange of people, events, and outlooks, gathered for this unusual festival—people from Tomsk, from nearby Novosibirsk, where I was living and working on a USAID project with people with disabilities, a German film crew sent by queer icon Rosa von Praunheim, and even some people from San Francisco. We made a big splash. Many of those attending the festival were curious or perhaps avid filmgoers. The Tomsk gays and lesbians were fearful that they’d be seen and recognized and subsequently discriminated against, so not many came or else they sat in the back of the theater. The news media, gave us daily attention, and we were even visited by right-

wing evangelical protestors, in conference with U.S. Christians, who had heard about our “dangerous and sinful” venture.

Lyuba and I consummated our attraction at a party on the festival’s opening night. I had been dancing, letting my body go, feeling the beat in every pore, moving every muscle. I was laughing and having a good time. After the dance, I saw Lyuba start up the spiral stairs to the main deck. I called her name from the bottom of the steps but the music was too loud. Not completing her ascent, she turned around, came clunking down in her femmy wedged shoes, and found herself next to me at the foot of the stairs. She smiled. I could smell the smoke on her breath. Squaring my shoulders in a challenge I asked, “Why did you come here?” And she answered as if I should know: “To see you!” Butterflies. Then she put her arms around me and hugged me with her whole body in plain view of all the people partying. I was impressed with her boldness. She turned around, and I followed her up the spiral stairs.

Alone on the cool deck, I felt the heat of Lyuba’s body against me as we stood talking and kissing intermittently. I sensed the pleasant rush and imagined she had felt the same. I was surprised by her desire and thought she might just be experimenting, but I wanted her anyway. I liked holding her in my arms. I wondered if the films had turned her on or made her curious. She was talking nervously. It was hard to go but we had to show up downstairs.

When we got back to the party, I found a seat. Lyuba unabashedly sat down in my lap, laughing comfortably. Not a bit worried about the presence of her TV2 coworkers and her boss, she shouted to me over the music, “My husband said it’s okay if I need lesbian love, he can understand why women need to be close.”

My arm around her waist slipped down to caress her beautiful butt, which I held securely and close. She wore a soft golden velour top with gold buttons, a black taffeta-like miniskirt that hugged her curvaceous figure, and dark stockings. She had long legs and an independent air that was rare for a Russian *naturalka* (straight woman), yet she was bi and maybe even a lesbian married to a man. I wanted to bear her weight as long as I could. I didn’t usually go for femmes but she had a tough, confident energy, too.

We international queers spent five days in Tomsk. Not many local *thematic* (code word for queer in Russian) people attended the films—*Mala Noche*, *Changing Our Minds: the Story of Dr. Evelyn Hooker*, *My Father Is Coming*. While we were generally welcomed, the weird religious fanatics with signs blocked the theater doorways. I had seen English versions of these before: “Gays will go to hell!” “Homosexuals are an abomination.” “Pray for these sinners!” I questioned the young Russian protestors about their action. They behaved as if they had

been trained by the U.S. religious right, which was very actively promoting homophobia at the time. They were probably not even from Tomsk.

The TV2 News generously covered our festival every evening with a serious approach. Later I found out that one of the newscasters was gay and a friend of Lyuba's. One day, TV2 showed interviews with people on the street about the "homosexual film festival." The majority made favorable comments: "I don't see why people can't just love whoever they want." "It's wonderful that they could bring films like these to Tomsk." I was interviewed in a half-hour spot on their "*Chas Pik*" [*Rush Hour*] program as a representative of the lesbian and gay community in the U.S. The woman host asked about me and whether they could be open about my sexuality. I explained that we queers were everywhere and we were no different from others. We wanted to be accepted as equals. The host said, "I didn't want to surprise you because the show is live and it's been a closed subject for all these years."

"Whatever you said, it was good for the queer community," my friend Sergey remarked afterwards. The Russian public saw Americans and others paying attention to their city, and this was newsworthy and affirmative. Non-queer Russians rarely thought of particular individuals as gay, especially those they knew. Being gay was clandestine, yet there was such a strong need for openness. The movie theater manager, the projectionist, Lyuba who dubbed the films, and even the TV announcer all turned out to be queer, yet none of them said it openly, of course. Our Western attitudes seemed so public—it was like night and day.

"Why didn't you just stay with your husband?" Lyuba asked one day when we were alone in her dubbing booth. Hers was the voice that sounded in the theater in Russian after I and others in the team had translated the films. Her soft, sexy alto voice with its melodious cadence could make you fall in love with language when you listened. I had gone up to the booth to see how it all worked. It was cozy and quiet there, and I enjoyed watching her work in close quarters. It would be some time before she had to start so we chatted.

"I couldn't." I left it at that. It would be impossible to explain to her why I couldn't live two lives, like many Russians do, including her. I knew what she would say: Why would you not prefer a family to this adventurous yet marginal existence as a lesbian?

"I always wanted a child," she went on as if hearing my thoughts. "I am so happy and continuously amazed by my daughter. I can't imagine life without her."

"It's not that I don't like children, I love them," I said a bit defensively. "And now I miss that experience in my life because I'm

growing older. The times were just different in the 70s and 80s. I don't know how to explain. It was a time of activism for me."

She must have heard a direction in her earphone, for she suddenly started speaking the introduction of the film into the mike. I stood against the soundproof dotted walls at an angle so I could see her lovely face and watch her mouth move over the words in Russian. I wanted that mouth pressed to mine. Her voice sounded at once natural yet dramatized what was going on. She had to keep up with the action. She kept her eyes on the pages, turning them when necessary. Her movements, her voice, her mouth were so enticing.

I wondered why Lyuba was so drawn to me, an open lesbian from the U.S., who was so indiscreet about herself. When she finished, we were alone in the dubbing booth and she kissed me, taking my tongue without a care that the door might open! I flashed on the tremendous need I had for sex with women in 1977 before I had come out. For months I had been dreaming about women, real sex with women, but I wasn't in love with anyone in particular. Where did they come from, all those dreams of women who made luscious love? They touched me in places where I'd never been touched, and stayed with me.

At that time I was living in the San Francisco Bay area with my husband. We had a quiet suburban house and I was attending graduate school at U.C. Berkeley. I had heard about meeting places for women-loving women but that was beyond me. Like most of society, I imagined lesbians as a bunch of tough bull dykes with short haircuts and manly swaggers. At the time of my dreams, I had made friends with a gay man at graduate school and sometimes questioned him demurely about his lifestyle, never mentioning anything about my lesbian desires. He was trying to be normal himself at the time. No one *wanted* to be gay. Who would choose such a lifestyle of furtiveness and exposure to ridicule or worse?

In one of my many conversations with Lyuba about all this, I tried to explain. "The sixties and seventies were such an important, exciting time. I feel fortunate to have lived then, and I was without a doubt shaped by those times. The anti-Vietnam war protests, the civil rights movement, the women's movement—so much activity, creativity, and education! Everything and everyone was changing so fast. Those songs from the sixties and seventies that are so popular here in Russia—do you understand what Bob Dylan, the Beatles and the Byrds were saying?"

While there had been no real women's movement in Russia, there was a kind of catching up going on during perestroika in styles and sexual freedom, as well as in curiosity about homosexuality. Women were wanting everything from lipstick and stylish short skirts, to leadership positions. People had affairs no matter what system of

government was in place or what movement was going on.

Lyuba told me she had a male lover once, her physician. “It was a passionate affair and nothing more, not something to leave your family over.” No one had to know. Was she going through some other changes because of me and the film festival people in Tomsk?

I asked Lyuba if she could identify as bisexual or lesbian. To her these labels had no meaning. Choosing one sexual identity made absolutely no sense to people who had kept their private lives to themselves and safe from intrusion by the state. Identifying was such a foreign concept, no doubt coupled with fear of being found out and persecuted. One woman I interviewed about her identity even said to me, “Why limit yourself?” In Russia I began to wonder why I was so attached to calling myself a lesbian and how strange this must seem to Lyuba and others.

Lyuba told this startling story in my ear above the din during one of the parties. “I was about twenty-one. I lay next to my friend in bed. She was staying over with me. We had been talking. I fell asleep and I woke to the sensation of her hand stroking my leg. I thought I was mistaken, so I pretended to be asleep. I didn’t know what to do. It was terrifying. Look at what we were living in—people imprisoned for the smallest joke, lives destroyed because someone didn’t like you. I suddenly felt that Stalin was in the room watching me. Stalin! I opened my eyes, and I could see my girlfriend wanting to kiss me. I refused. Are you crazy? I don’t want this, and I don’t want to be in this situation with you ever again.”

I knew about Stalin’s camps. Ten years ago people could still be convicted for hooliganism or even for being unemployed, and there were always psychiatric hospitals for antisocial behavior which included homosexuality. Men were being rounded up for gay sexual acts, and Lyuba had found herself in bed with a lesbian. I could imagine her horror and the specter of Stalin dictating her desires.

Two years earlier while interviewing a woman in St. Petersburg, the girlfriend of a Russian lesbian activist I had known for several years, I asked bluntly, “Are you a lesbian?” The woman looked at me blankly, so I rephrased the question. “How would you identify yourself?” Neither question seemed to make sense to her. After a moment she looked down: “You know, it’s not polite [*nye prinyato*] to ask someone about their private life here.”

In 1991, I had gone with a group of activists and journalists, some of the first from outside Russia, to a Russian prison, the infamous Lubyanka. We wanted to report on the conditions of gays specifically, but we didn’t actually tell the authorities that. I met a man there who said his wife was responsible for his imprisonment. She had snitched

on him because she was jealous. She had found out about his gay relationship and reported him in a fit of rage. He ended up spending five years in prison, in the harshest, most degrading conditions. A gay man was the lowest of the low in the Russian prison pecking order.

Lyuba and her husband and daughter live quietly in Tomsk, a region of gulags. I didn't see her apartment, but I could imagine it—two rooms and a kitchen in a six-story building. A balcony overlooks some trees in a courtyard, the smell of black bread from the store across the yard wafts to their fifth floor window every morning. She lives a safe life with her physicist-husband (we had this in common—my ex-husband was also a physicist). Lyuba does her own weekly review show on television and dubs films. They do not have much money and just get by. They are a family, depending on one another. They have each other. With the unpredictability of the Soviet and now the Russian government, nothing is sure. Safety in relationships becomes that much more important. I began to feel not quite right about having this affair.

One of my favorite Russian poets, Marina Tsvetaeva, beloved in Russia, was bisexual and had several passionate affairs with women in view of her husband. Her poetry is full of longing and incredible rhythms but difficult to translate. When I told Lyuba I believed Tsvetaeva was an important icon and model for lesbians in Russia, she began to seek out all the Tsvetaeva she had never read, “in order to feel closer to you,” she said, “but also for myself.”

One day Lyuba announced, “I was born a big baby. My arm was broken in childbirth by the midwife.” She never wanted to talk about her deformed arm and hid it habitually, offended when I used the word disabled.

“I'm not disabled.” She discreetly moved her arm behind her. Was this an intimation of something more complex and unusual about my beautiful, flirtatious Lyuba?

Having a disability in Russia was a stigma, just as it is everywhere else. I had been working on a USAID-funded wheelchair project in Novosibirsk to help people achieve more independence and I'd learned much about people with disabilities. I didn't mean to embarrass Lyuba; I was just being open, like I was about sexuality, yet she was offended. Who was I to know what her disability meant to her? I never asked her again. She was the one who told me the following year in a letter that one of her closest friends, a short-statured man had just died. When I called to offer my condolences, she told me he had been a kind of mentor to her and had educated her in surviving social prejudices. Lyuba, married to a Jewish man, knew discrimination on several fronts. She was experienced as a marginalized person and most of her friends were queer.

I thought of Lyuba at odd times back in San Francisco. Years later, I was giving a Russian filmmaker, a straight woman, a guided tour through the gay Castro district. She asked a series of questions that seemed almost rude: "I'm curious—is it a form of protest? I mean...you've been with a man, it's not like it was unbearable, right?" I said no, that it was a desire for women, a desire for a different kind of love, an understanding and depth I felt men didn't have, that I felt sexual excitement for women. It was strange to these Russian women, not so much that I was without a man but that I didn't have a child. Such attitudes are socialized, not based on what is natural. Being queer is as normal as being straight.

That first night on the back deck of the ship, I had told Lyuba that I never had a desire for a child. Physically, pregnancy had never appealed to me but I missed the chance for a family. I was living another life, a life I have not regretted. "Is it a form of protest?" the Russian woman had asked. Did that mean I was trying to challenge traditions, living on the edge? Now, so used to my life as a lesbian, I couldn't trade it.

I was so drawn to Lyuba and enjoyed our lovemaking. The festival had been such hard work, and when it was almost over all kinds of emotions, feelings of love and gratitude and frustration got entwined with the passion. My intense feelings led to a yearning for intimacy. And Lyuba was there. I didn't think at the time that it may not be right. I wanted to be touched, to be close. It was an expansive feeling of love in the context of the festival.

What happened in Moscow? It was terrible. A change of heart or a change in context. Perhaps an excuse to sever the relationship, on my part, and maybe on hers too. Sabotage.

I often went to my close friends' dacha when I was in Moscow. It was in Pobeda, about an hour by train from the Kiev station, not far from where Sophia Parnok spent her last days. My friends, Lena and Sveta, like Alice and Gertrude, had been a couple for over twenty years and many queer friends came to their dacha and visited. When I arrived one evening, tired and hot from the *elektrichka* ride and standing most of the way, Sveta met me at the door. I hugged her and she said in a low voice: "Lyuba is here. The one from Tomsk."

I was shocked. "How did she get here?"

"I don't know. She called Lena and I think she wanted to come here because of you, and so they came out together earlier today." I remembered I had left her Lena's number once as a way to contact me if she needed to.

I walked into the dining room and Lyuba acted as if she had always been there, always known my friends at the dacha. She was engaged in some conversation with Vitya and didn't come right over

to greet me. I could tell immediately she had been drinking. Then I saw a bottle of vodka in the middle of the table. The whole situation upset me—she was coming into my territory, my friends, on her own. It was odd the way she set up these connections independently, because of me, or to get to me? She rose and angled over to me, giving me a cursory hug. I hugged and greeted Vitya and Lena. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I didn't want her there in that condition blabbing about who knows what.

The evening was difficult. I had had issues with alcoholics, and I feared she was joining the crowd. We had let go of each other by mail, ending the affair, but I felt she was coming after me obliquely. Moscow was a very long way from Tomsk. Why was she here? And why did she seek out my friends?

We slept in separate beds. The next day we left together. I found myself furious with her for drinking and seeking me out. We argued on the *elektrichka* while everyone else in the train sat like statues. She claimed she just wanted to meet my friends—who weren't mine alone. I said I could barely talk to her last night and that she still reeked of alcohol. The argument was irreparable. We didn't contact each other again.

And then a letter came, trying to rekindle something. I couldn't. So much had worn down the love. My life had changed in the U.S. It was no use. The memory of making love during white nights in St. Petersburg that time we were there remains. "And pink flamingos flew into Tomsk after the festival, did you know that," she had said before things got sour. What a phenomenon! Weren't they supposed to migrate to Africa? Yet they flew to Siberia.

I will never forget when Lyuba first put her arms around me on that cool, moonlit night on the deck and we kissed so deeply. The rest did not matter—the details, I mean. Back home, I simply felt less lonely for a while. Someone cared about me on the other side of the world. I loved wearing her ring. It was big and beautiful like she was. Halfway around the world someone was thinking about me. When the moon was full above the hill, I wondered if she could see the same moon even though it was midday in Tomsk. She had looked at it fifteen hours earlier, perhaps.

Was it the same?

Sissies and Queers

If I am making a difficult decision or feeling in a funk, I go to a place in my mind that brings together key people and aspects of my life. I visualize a vast open field where horses graze, a green field with an area sheltered by craggy oak trees. I sit with my imaginary wise old friend/mentor, a tall and strong woman with flowing gray hair. My cat steps toward us in his stealthy way; friends from long ago and now, acquaintances I care about, my sister who died at eighteen, a friend I met in San Francisco, those who nurture and have nurtured me, and others I have met all draw near. The air is fresh and easy, the sun ablaze. The creek beside us gurgles and nature embraces us. This is how I imagine the natural alliance between gender and queer theory—a field of shared knowledge and interdisciplinary work.

An important milestone in my life was interviewing close to a hundred queers, sexual minorities, in Russia in the 1990s. I had many rich meetings with people, and their openness, their willingness to explain themselves to me, was humbling. I even helped make connections between Russian and U.S. transgender people. An extensive interview with a man who had spent a total of eighteen years in prison in Siberia for being gay was especially revealing. He was a gentle, animated person, a rich storyteller in Russian, with the expressiveness of a true performer. In his late fifties, his white hair curling at the ends and a broad smile showing a gold tooth, he related the story of his first adolescent love affair with another boy as if it had just happened. His time in prison and other details he chose to relate captured a life that few people have known.

“What would I want?” he said when I asked at the end of the interview if there was anything he’d like to add. He sighed and smiled, “To live freely, to be able to get together openly in a club. I want to live and relax among my own kind, our people—to talk, to sit in a cafe, not in some closet. That’s what I want, just one thing, an open society.” A dream of community, a desire to be among his own kind, and an open society!

People want to be accepted for who they are, but we live in a world in which we can be easily stereotyped or even put in prison, brutalized, or killed for who we are. In the U.S., we had the vicious cases of a young gay man, Matthew Shepard, beaten to death in Wyoming, and Brandon Teena, who was raped and killed in Nebraska for being transgender (as depicted in the film, *Boys Don’t Cry*). Young people are bullied in the schools everywhere, which sometimes drives them to suicide—and being gay, lesbian, or a boy who seems girlish are by far the greatest bullying points in schools.

“In a 2005 survey about gay bullying statistics, teens reported that the number two reason they are bullied is because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender expression. The number one reason reported was because of appearance. In fact, about 9 out of 10 LGBT teens have reported being bullied at school within the past year because of their sexual orientation,” according to the website bullyingstatistics.org.

In September of 1996, I helped bring a queer film festival to Tomsk, Siberia. One of the films was by Yugoslav director Zelimir Zilnik, *Marble Ass*. It takes place in Serbia (part of the former Yugoslavia) during the beginning of the nationalist war there. The main characters in the film are a gun-wielding macho man who has just returned from battle, hungry for more killing, and two transgender (male-to-female) prostitutes for whom killing is the furthest thing from their minds. The film depicts a feminine view of war through the eyes of transgender women who have refused to be men. The prostitutes’ words, their relationship, their gentleness, and their refusal to participate in the violence all around them is touching and profound. Especially significant is the fact that the film came from an extremely misogynistic society in which the government was promoting war against ethnic groups, and against women as a gender. The transgender women are important symbols.

In the U.S. during the women’s movement and gay liberation movement of the seventies and eighties, much hidden history of LGBTs was revealed. One important finding was the existence of two-spirit, three-spirit, four-spirit identities in different Native American cultures. With various names in the Native languages, acceptance and acknowledgement of gender variance and in some cases the venerating of these two-spirit people, was an affirmation for LGBTs. This cultural fact highlighted the complexities of identity and the senselessness of the old binary male/female dichotomy, as does Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity and queer theory, which has become part of mainstream academic discourse since then. There is a great deal of evidence that gender variance and queer relationships have existed throughout time, and that the concept of two genders was actually unusual in older societies and cultures. Furthermore, humans create these concepts; even biologically there is a great deal of variance.

There is nothing natural about the family album, about sex or gender, about our lives generally. The invention of the sex-gender paradigm serves to oppress, control, and reduce people to two types: male and female. These two types are only supposed to act in two ways: the masculine way or the

feminine way. But I contend there are thousands, millions, trillions of genders.

Educator and theorist Marla Morris writes this in an essay in William F. Pinar's *Queer Theory in Education*. Yet the masculine/feminine binary has been an established norm for centuries, and the nuclear heterosexual family too.

If we examine the oppression of lesbian, gay, transgender, or any other identity on a queer continuum, we must certainly look at the relationship of gender to sexuality. We are living in a world that we did not create, a world of strictly defined male and female gender roles—in any society, whether North American, European, Latin American, African, or Asian. Although sexual minorities have been present in all cultures throughout time, they have not been accepted and have often been shunned and persecuted. But they have survived. The connection with gender variance or performance of gender is part of that survival.

In 1980 poet Adrienne Rich published an article with the provocative title “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” to challenge a world dominated by heterosexuals with the fact of lesbianism. To contextualize Rich’s article, this was a time when promotion of the family and oppression of women was at its height in the U.S. From a feminist perspective, Rich was questioning male domination and trying to foreground the strong and natural bond that women have with each other. Rich begins by saying, “Biologically men have only one innate orientation—a sexual one that draws them to women—while women have two innate orientations, sexual toward men and reproductive toward their young.” And she ends with the idea that lesbian feminism is an important way to fight the patriarchal oppression that permeates our society with a vengeance. The idea of a lesbian continuum throughout human history, a range of same-sex interest and behavior, as opposed to strict lesbian identification, is unfamiliar to most people because of the power of homophobia to silence any diversion from the norm.

The masculine/feminine binary and the family have been an established norm for centuries. We are so used to it that it is hard to see that anything different could have existed. Nontraditional pairs, individuals who don’t fit the norm, and sexual minorities have been silenced and marginalized throughout written history. There have been brief periods of acceptance, but overall any departure from the family and the gender binary has been unacceptable and even criminalized. Intersex children are assigned one gender with the other suppressed. Sexual variance is thereby hidden, repressed, and of

course ignored. This is among many serious and large-scale instances of social exclusion and persecution. People have been harassed for as simple a reason as cross-dressing.

Alfred Kinsey, in his mid-twentieth century interviews and studies, found that there had been countless previously unacknowledged instances of same-sex fantasies and nontraditional sexual activity. These were secrets that people did not dare reveal except in anonymous interviews, and Kinsey uncovered a desire for same-sex relations that had never been documented. The research was done almost exclusively with white people, however. He recorded anonymous instances of sexual union between same-sex partners that had never been mentioned to any friend or family member and the number of males and females who engaged in homosexual sex and fantasies was much larger than anyone expected. It was fear of being shunned or labeled homosexual, or fear of being seen as the opposite gender, that kept people from being open. What Kinsey learned was that homosexuality and gender were natural but socially constructed and could even change in the course of a person's life.

Why is the worst insult for a boy being called "sissy"? The derogation of gay men is inseparable from the derogation of women. The word sissy means womanish, which in turn means faggot/queer/gay when applied to males. This particular insult is directly connected with a secondary subhuman status and disregard for women. For a man to be called a woman is an insult. In male culture, men often joke by calling each other "girl" as an insult, or they use other epithets that mean womanish. If a nonmasculine man is called a woman and a gay man is called a woman, what then is a lesbian? A man-hater? What is someone who is transgendered? In elementary and especially high school, these questions are manifested in bullying and are barely discussed.

Homophobia and the gender binary are the bedrock of the nuclear family, which in turn is essential to the patriarchal status quo. Gays in the military, same-sex marriage, and the reality of many genders threaten the patriarchal system. Moreover, if women are worth less than men, then gays and transgendered people are worth even less in the hierarchy.

How can this be changed? While it seems clear that gay men, transgender, intersex, and other gender-variant people are associated with women and their subjugation, some may argue that capitalism or the class privilege of men in patriarchy is the primary struggle. The patriarchy, through the ideology of masculinity and the gender binary upholds the oppression of sexual minorities. And capitalism is the system that it promotes. In 1989, John Stoltenberg, a scholar and antipornography activist, wrote in a book called *Refusing to be a Man*:

Essays on Sex and Justice, “Cultural homophobia keeps men’s sexual aggression directed towards women. Homophobia keeps men acting in concert as male supremacists so they won’t be perceived as an appropriate target for male supremacist sexual treatment. Male supremacy requires homophobia to keep men safe from the sexual aggression of men.”

During the terrifying war that split Yugoslavia, men had the license to violate women in a big way. Lepa Mladjenovich, a lesbian, feminist, and anti-war activist, struggled with the hierarchy of important issues that were being promoted by the Yugoslav government and media. The struggle for lesbian human rights did not even make it to the list of issues of the day. When people were getting killed in an ethnic war and others were scrounging for food and necessities, how could one argue for the importance of the struggle for queer rights? Lepa writes about an incident that brought home the importance of all struggles.

Three men stopped four of us while we were writing lesbian graffiti [in Belgrade]. They came and attacked us precisely as lesbians. Two of them were in the back with hockey sticks and one of them stood in front of me. He watched me, I watched him and I thought “This is a face that demands war. I had never seen him before. He pushed me to the wall, broke my eyeglasses and shouted “You dirty lesbian, I can throw you in this door and kill you—no one would know. Clear off!” When I asked him who he was, he exclaimed “Don’t you utter your dirty words. The mosque is the place for you.” Lesbians were dirtying his straight male street, just as Muslims were dirtying his straight Serb street. Gay men were being harassed in their parks, Roma people were being spat upon, women were forever first victims of their husbands.

After that, it was evident that war implies hatred directed against every difference, against Moslems in Belgrade, then against Roma, Albanians, lesbians—once upon a time in other places Others were Jews and communists. It opened in my mind so clearly that opposing war means coming out with the logic of supporting all social differences at once. One of the aims of war and pro-fascist ideology is not only separation of people of different nationalities, but the separation of people’s own identities as well.

These are wise words from a sister and activist, educated through struggle. Hers is the only answer—to unite and not allow ourselves to

be divided by the forces that are driven to dominate, silence, or even annihilate us. Some may say, isn't sex a private issue? When people lose their jobs or cannot get housing or cannot see loved ones, when they are dying, sexuality becomes a political and human rights issue. Being quiet and ashamed about one's sexuality only leads to sickness and decay. Uniting with other oppressed sectors can mean hope, safety in numbers, and mutual support.

Banded about in the 1990s was an absurd statement made by a famous Russian woman personality on a talk show, when the open discussion of homosexuality had just begun. "There is no sex in Russia," she said in all seriousness. She was alluding to the idea that open sexual expression, including pornography, had been banned in the USSR and Russia, an idea similar to the denial of homosexual existence in some Arab countries where there is a long tradition of same-sex sexual activity in the bathhouses. Denial does not make homosexuality go away.

Throughout the world, queers have been told to hide their identities and not flaunt their sexuality, while heterosexuals have been given full permission to kiss in public and talk about their affairs, etc. Meanwhile queers must bury their identities, which promotes self-hatred and a neurotic fear of what others think about them, which in turn leads to health problems and sometimes violent homophobic reactions. Just as society is stuck on the two-gender model, never deviating from that possibility, so gays and lesbians are told not to exist and to subscribe to the heterosexual norm.

In our times, it is still acceptable to publicly subordinate women and queers through social rules, violence, and patriarchy. How is this private? In Russia and Uganda and other places today, being queer is deemed criminal. Worldwide, even women in the twenty-first century have still not overthrown the yoke of their oppression and that fact attests to the strong interest of the economic and social system in keeping traditions in place. Thus the argument that all struggles have to be fought simultaneously becomes more compelling.

Fixed ideas of gender and sexuality can be challenged by the understanding that all identity exists in relation to others. Scholar Kira Hall suggests that the *kothi* (feminine men who take a passive role in relationship with men) in India need a man to help define them as women. Kuzmich, the man I interviewed in Russia, when asked how he managed to survive in the camp, said he identified as active. He purposely posed as an active/masculine partner in prison to escape the brutality that the passive/feminine prisoners were subject to. This is not unlike the patriarchal setup in many societies—the male/active partner identifies as such so he can continue to be the man and have dominion over a family (his world), while the female/passive is

ridiculed and marginalized for her gender.

Feminist and film theorist Teresa de Lauretis originally coined the term *queer theory* to show the radical, subversive, and changeable character of sexual identity, “queer unsettles and questions the genderedness of sexuality.” Queer theory as a term means looking at things from a untraditional, unusual point of view. In her book *Queer Theory*, Annamarie Jagose notes, “Teresa de Lauretis, the theorist often credited with inaugurating the phrase ‘queer theory’, abandoned it barely three years later, on the grounds that it had been taken over by those mainstream forces and institutions it was coined to resist.” Queer theory can still be useful in analyzing sexuality.

What does it mean to look at things through queer eyes? An acquaintance in St. Petersburg had just read Tsvetaeva’s novella, *Story about Sonechka*, about the gay theater world. When we discussed it, I asked, “Did you know that Tsvetaeva was bisexual or lesbian?” She paused, then said she had to read it again with that in mind. How different and enriched that reading could be! She could hypothesize queerly about Tsvetaeva’s interest in Sonya Golidey and the two gay actors who are featured so prominently.

Queer theory says that sexuality and gender are socially constructed and that this should be kept in mind in the reading of a text. It challenges strictly held identities and points to a fluidity in gender and identity. Arising from feminism and the exploration of women’s roles in society and of fixed identities, queer theory questions the idea that sexuality and even gender are part of the essential self. Queer theory is a reading that acknowledges complexity and experiences that cannot be labeled or permanently identified. Judith Butler, in her seminal work on queer theory, *Gender Trouble*, raises the questions: Isn’t identity a performance? Aren’t sexual acts and gender and sexual identities socially constructed? Queer theory is a deconstruction of these ideas. And that is precisely what the Russians taught me—that U.S. activists’ labeling approach to identity is odd, not normal. Identity and relationships are more flexible and fluid; just as there are many genders, there can be many sexual identities.

In her introduction to *The Feminist Critique of Language*, Deborah Cameron reminds us that “the idea of ‘silence’ recurs in women’s writing,” which means “they lack the ability to use the language [to describe their lives].” Queer theory and queer pedagogy give us great opportunities to create the language and space for hidden identities and desires to be discussed. Gender, desire, and the unconscious do not get talked about in the classroom. Furthermore, we are still exploring the language of sexuality.

In my essay “The Rest Is Poetry,” about the problem of coming

out, I wrote about how the lack of a language among the Russian lesbians I was meeting in the early nineties affected their perceptions of themselves as lesbians. A poem I had written about lesbian sex was at first shocking to some. Later, after more discussion and reading, the poem became more palatable and even a model.

In an imagined field, my visualization, I see feminist and queer scholars taking up each other's issues for research and pedagogy. I mingle with all kinds of people. I yearn for inclusion, comfort, and courage. Scholar and friend Stephanie Vandrick has often spoken of herself as an ally, crossing the boundaries that separate queers and straights. Why are there boundaries? An ally means joining forces with a separate country, with others who are labeled or may be defining their own culture. The ally knows that our goals in the struggle are the same—liberation, human rights, or simply a new way of looking at social relations as a whole.

During the height of the 1970s women's movement, Gayle Rubin wrote:

Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men of whatever is the local version of feminine traits; in women of the local definition of masculine traits. The division of the sexes has the effect of repressing some of the personality characteristics of virtually everyone, man and woman.

For Kate Bornstein, author of *Gender Outlaw*, transgender people have been both shunned and accepted by the lesbian and gay community. Along the feminist/queer/transgender continuum, the question of coming out as transgender has become crucial. Why should gender variance be hidden or intersex people be slighted and ignored?

While feminism has critiqued gender roles in terms of inequality, queer theory challenges these roles in a different way. Let's look at masculinity which is deemed to be the very opposite of gay. According to conventional ideas, if a gay man is an unmasculine man and a lesbian is a woman trying to be a man, how are transgender people perceived? A male-to-female transgender person has lost her manhood, and she falls to an even lower status than gays and lesbians. Both lesbians and female-to-male transgendered people are perceived as women who want to be men. Overall this relates to the societal negative regard of women and queers and all the phobias associated with them are at the very heart of misogyny.

Unfortunately misogyny, transphobia, and homophobia are

worldwide problems. With the great migrations of our times, education to combat prejudices and intercultural communication training are very much needed. Some of my English language students from China, Russia, and elsewhere say, for example, that there are no gays in their countries or that “it only happens in prison.” They fear “catching AIDS” if they associate with gays and lesbians. Those who are gay are afraid to come out, especially to compatriots because news may get back home to their families.

In my research in Russia, I spoke to a greater number of female to male transgendered people than male to female. Two Russian sexologists confirmed to me the existence of more FTMs than MTFs in Russia. Does this have a social basis? In other words, are some women trying to move out of being female perhaps because of social privilege or class? I met a female couple in Russia, one of whom clearly said she wanted to have a sex change because it would make her and her partner’s lives easier and they would be accepted. I have also met people who were not willing to go through sex changes but wanted to be considered a different sex among friends. Were they passing to avoid transphobia? The world needs more stories and explanations of all this to progress in the arena of human rights.

Non-Western concepts of gender encountered outside the Judeo-Christian, European-based tradition give a perspective on the variance that has existed throughout time:

1. The *berdache*, or “two-spirits,” Native American term for a person who is transgender or simply cross-dresses, male or female. This identity existed in over one hundred tribes, according to Gilbert Herdt in *Same Sex, Different Cultures*. Some of these people were considered shamans, some had same-sex relations. For students of “multiple minorities, having historical homosexual antecedents helps to counter the recurrent charge that homosexuality is a white Western contaminant,” writes Arthur Lipkin in *Understanding Homosexuality, Changing Schools*.

2. *Kathoeys* or “ladyboys” have had a long tradition in Thailand. They are thought of as a third gender—males who dress as a women but take pride in their male genitals. The majority are open and have jobs. To gain a level of acceptance and to make a living some turn to performance while others become sex workers. Unfortunately, some kathoeys have become part of the greater sex industry exploited by rich Europeans and Americans, which has led to a derogatory association of kathoeys with homosexuals. This has transformed an old tradition or cultural practice.

“Buddhism takes a generally positive and supportive view of sexuality, and about homosexuality,” says Herdt.

3. In Polynesia, Hawaii, and Samoa there is a third gender that is very accepted by the society and not shameful. The Samoan *fa'afafine* are males who make “feminine” choices about gait, speech, appearance, and even the kind of work they want to do. The original gender focus again changed to a focus on sexual orientation with the encroachment of Europeans, Herdt says. Today there is a Samoan gay culture separate from the *fa'afafine*, but there is a strong alliance between the two groups.

4. The *hijras* of India also have a long tradition and live in communities. Most are eunuchs and are considered both man and woman, even though “their feminine dress and manners are often exaggerated,” says Serena Nanda, as cited by Herdt. Historically they reject sexuality, but again because of the demands of the sex industry, they have come to relate to heterosexual men who consider the hijras “women” or passive partners. Their roles in society are complex, although they are considered a specific caste and devotees of the Hindu mother goddess.

In *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, Paula Gunn Allen, a Native American lesbian activist and professor, discusses gender roles and gender designation in various American Indian cultures. Gender variance and homosexuality both male and female were accepted.

The Yuma had a tradition of gender designation based on dreams; a female who dreamed of weapons became a male for all practical purposes. In this the Yumas were similar to the neighboring Mohaves and Cocopah, except the gender-role designation was based on the choice of companions and play objects of a young person. In such systems a girl who chose to play with boys or with boys' objects such as a bow and arrow became a male functionary. Among the Mohave, another dream-culture people related to the Yuma, the *hwame*, a term roughly corresponding to “dike” in English, took a male name and was in all respects subject to ritual male taboos vis á vis females, such as avoidance of contact with a menstruating wife. The *hwame's* wife was not considered *hwame* but simply a woman.

Once, after an interview with a transgender person, I was invited to a party with his friends in Novosibirsk. There were some twenty

people there, about half FTMs and the others very feminine-looking women. There were a few established pairs, and we did some dancing. At one point in the party, the girls went into the kitchen to chat, and the guys were in the sitting room. I felt confused about where I should go and asked my friend Sasha. He pointed to the kitchen—the females. I felt a bit disappointed because I didn't consider myself a traditional female—I didn't wear makeup and heels, I dressed in a more androgynous way, and most of all I didn't look up to men as superior. But they certainly weren't straight women either.

The heterosexist oppression enforced by European Christianity knows no bounds. Allen, after discussing Judy Grahn's research in *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds*, writes:

Recent scholarly work reveals the universal or nearly universal presence of homosexuality and lesbianism among tribal peoples, the special respect and honor often accorded gay men and women, and the alteration in that status as a result of colonization of the [American] continent by Anglo-Europeans. These studies demonstrate the process by which external conquest and colonization become internalized among the colonized with vivid clarity. Homophobia, which was rare (perhaps even absent entirely) among tribal peoples in the Americas, has steadily grown among them as they have traded traditional tribal values for Christian industrial ones.

Traditional gender roles and crossovers of gender and sexuality exist in all cultures—Vietnam, Serbia, the Dominican Republic, and Senegal, to give only a few examples. Most people in our societies are not educated in variant identities. Queer scholars should not be the only ones to take up questions involving queer communication.

We need not a merging of feminist and queer analyses but an alliance of all sectors, an intersection, an inclusion of queer in all language and gender studies and research and vice versa. We need more feminists, more critical pedagogy scholars, more linguists and teachers to understand and adopt queer theory and be aware of the overwhelming heterosexist focus of our scholarship and education. Concerted study and understanding of our marginalized communities, integration of queer interpretations in all disciplines, and interdisciplinary research in gender and queer theory is long overdue. We can move beyond the divisions in society and refuse to be other and join forces with all marginalized sectors to create a better world.

Let us remember that our perceptions of gender and sexuality are socially based and Eurocentric in the case of the U.S. Other cultures may have their own prejudices and perceptions that are foreign and

useful to learn about to broaden our perspectives. Here is another gender-variant report from an internet website on Siberian shamanism about the little known Chukchi in northern Siberia where a third gender is also embraced.

The Chukchi (and neighboring indigenous peoples including the Koryak and the Kamchadal) are a nomadic, shamanic people who embrace a third gender. Generally shamans are biologically male with some adoption of female roles and appearance, who marry men but also are not subject to the social limitations placed on women. Third gender Chukchi could accompany men on the hunt, as well as take care of family.

Great opportunities exist in classrooms, lectures, and print to address queer theory and the deconstruction of gender and sexuality, to open students' minds to gender issues in their own cultures and to point out the presence of queers throughout time. This is not a new concept, and we can all benefit from connecting it with the control of women and other sectors while not allowing ourselves to be alienated and divided from others. The educational leadership that promotes real learning is well expressed by Bonny Norton and Aneta Pavlenko in *Gender and English Language Learners*: "Teachers need to be proactive and well-prepared to handle controversial topics, while maintaining a positive dynamic in the classroom. Furthermore they need to pay particular attention to learners who may be silenced by the dominant culture." I would like to see a natural alliance between gender and queer theory.

Judy Grahn calls her excellent coming of age book about being a radical lesbian feminist poet and activist, *A Simple Revolution*. This and other similar books recover our past. In the name of compulsory heterosexuality, great artists, intellectuals, young people, and workers have lost their lives. Intolerance and homophobia and misogyny have run rampant. The fifteenth century Spanish Inquisition and Nazism alike selected homosexuals and nontraditionally gendered people as early victims. We cannot allow this to happen again. More communication among all the divided identities, more boldness in elucidating the interrelatedness of gender and queer issues in our writing and teaching, are necessary strategies. Revolution, a kind of permanent revolution, continuous change, continuous critiquing of the *status quo*, require queer theory.



1990s lesbian organization: Independent Women's Club in St. Petersburg

Who Was Sophia Parnok?

Some would say Sophia Parnok was Marina Tsvetaeva's first woman lover, others would say she was Russia's Sappho, but many do not know her name. She has been identified as a minor lyrical poet with a particular intimate voice, born of the Silver Age of Russian culture. Only during perestroika and after did her poetry become somewhat known in Russia, a country where people are generally more aware of literary history, greater lovers of poetry, bigger readers than Americans.

Eyes wide open and mouth pressed tight.
I only want to cry out crudely:
"Oh silly! It's just the opposite—
Close, close your eyes, open your lips for me!"

Sophia Parnok wrote these lines in Soviet Russia in 1932. A Russian-Jewish poet born in 1885 in Taganrog, in the south of Russia, she made no secret of her sexual orientation in her life or her work during both the most tolerant and the most repressive times in Soviet Moscow in the early twentieth century. By the time of this poem she was already thinking of herself as writing for only a small circle of friends. Written for Nina Vedeneyeva, the last great love of her life, the poem above shockingly reveals a moment of intimacy, with a touch of humor and irony.

After having written five volumes of poetry, Sophia Parnok died in obscurity in 1933 at the age of forty eight, surrounded by her women friends. It was not until the 1990s that most of her work was published in Russia. She was a poet hidden away by censors, yet being hidden was also part of her persona. Her last book of published poems was called *Vpolgolosa (In a Low Voice)*. It was as if she knew that it would be her new communication style—to be quiet. She wrote in a letter to a friend that her voice and her poems were not ready to be heard and she was aware of that. It was the political and historical moment she lived in, but also she was a poet of lesbian intimacy and lived a Sapphic life.

To begin her life as a poet in the exciting atmosphere of the Silver Age in Russia, a time that invited all sorts of artistic currents, including European trends, must have been inspiring. Along with the atmosphere of political change, there was an anti-bourgeois strain in artistic circles, a challenge to traditional sexuality and relationships. Poets like Esenin and Mayakovsky spoke their rebellious poetry very

publicly. Cafe gatherings and smaller circles both in St. Petersburg and Moscow were popular. Mikhail Kuzmin was known for his gay cabaret performances and readings in St. Petersburg. The times blossomed in modernism—symbolism, futurism, acmeism, even a new sexual mysticism (Vasily Rozanov). At this time poet Vyacheslav Ivanov published his translations of Sappho which greatly influenced the age. Parnok saw herself as a rebellious female poet, and in this atmosphere she became known as a lesbian and accepted as such.

Although she was married once briefly (to pacify her parents), she declared, “I never was in love with a man.” Parnok had been involved in a five-year relationship with another woman and was an open lesbian when she met Marina Tsvetaeva and other artists and writers who mentored her in poetry. Her friend and fellow poet Vladislav Khodasevich described her as

Average in height, on the short side, with fair hair, parted on the side and tied back in a bun, a pale face which seemed like it had never been young. Sophia Yakovlevna was not very good-looking. But there was something charming and unexpectedly noble about her gray, protruding, attentive eyes, about her intense Lermontov-like look, about the turn of her head, slightly supercilious, about her soft, quite deep voice. Her opinions were independent, her speech direct.

In addition to identifying with the antitraditionalism of the age, Parnok held to a very traditional Russian background and foundation but coupled it with her own queer view. She believed Russia was feminine while Europe was masculine. She was Jewish yet she leaned toward Orthodox Christianity and other spiritual imagery in her poetry. The legacy of the great nineteenth century romantic poets—Pushkin, the lyric poet Tyutchev, and Karolina Pavlova, a Romantic woman poet—was a strong influence on her artistic sensibility. The newer currents of her time emphasizing the feminine and the soul and even revolutionary politics all impacted her.

But Sappho... She learned about Sappho, the lesbian icon from Ivanov’s popular translations published in 1914. Sappho’s life and poetry validated Parnok and her writing. Besides feeling a connection with Sappho as the mother of lesbians, Parnok herself became a kind of Sappho herself, later in life living in the Crimea near the sea and surrounded by her women friends and ex-lovers. Many lines reminiscent of Sappho resound in Parnok’s poetry, as scholars have pointed out.

One of the biggest influences on Parnok was Marina Tsvetaeva who was on the threshold of becoming one of Russia’s greatest poets when they met. Their two-year passionate relationship began when

they attended a literary salon in Moscow, at the home of their mutual friend Adelaida Gertsyk. Tsvetaeva, who was only twenty-two at the time and a married woman with a child, was immediately taken with the unusual Sophia Parnok, whose masculine air and assuredness about her lesbian identity attracted her. Soon after Sophia, also known as Sonya, also fell in love with Marina, an acquaintance wrote: "Sonya and Marina are an item in Moscow. They are inseparable." Their affair was renowned among friends in artistic circles. It was loving and stormy, and they parted ostensibly because of Sonya's wandering eye, but perhaps also because of differing views about relationships. Marina wrote "Girlfriend," a cycle of poems dedicated to this important moment in her sexual life that speaks more of her sexuality than her other writings. We can only guess from their writings that Marina and Sonya's intimacy had a strong impact on both of them. Parnok's biographer, Diana Burgin, claims that Sophia suffered no less than Marina over the demise of their relationship—a photograph of Marina was near her bedside at the time of Sophia's death.

In the mid-1920s, after the new revolutionary government took hold in Soviet Russia, officials launched a drive against lyric poets. The country was under tremendous pressure during the transition just to feed the population. At the time Sophia was living in Sudak in the Crimea, where she had connected with another alternative artistic circle, Maximilian Voloshin's, which Marina Tsvetaeva had also frequented and where they had been a couple in 1915. The official party line was that lyric poetry made no contribution to the new revolutionary life in Russia because it focused too much on the personal and the spiritual. Many lyric poets, including the much-revered Anna Akhmatova, were silenced, not always officially but through exclusion. Parnok was one of these and her relationships with women did not help her reputation.

As in much of the country, life in Sudak after the 1917 revolution, was not easy. Food was hard to come by and people were dying of famine and tuberculosis and other illnesses and problems that could not be addressed because of the transition and the blockade by Western nations. In an attempt to get everyone on board, the new local militias arrested innocent people. Parnok and her friend Adelaida Gertsyk were imprisoned for a few months for "not supporting the government." It was after this and after contracting tuberculosis, that Parnok went back to Moscow, thinking it might be easier to survive there. All the while she wrote, not only poetry but essays and a play, *Almast*. She believed in the spiritual power of creativity and knew it was necessary to her, like food.



Sophia Parnok (left) Olga Tsuberbuller (right)

Parnok published several books of poetry, but no more after 1928. The situation for everyone grew worse under Stalin who relegated artists, marginalized people, homosexuals, and anyone who suspected of opposing him, to prison camps. He even had many executed. The number of people sentenced to hard labor in the Soviet gulag over the next twenty five years was in the millions, all shrouded in secrecy and NKVD intrigue. For example, to this day it is not clear whether the thirty-year-old renowned bisexual poet Sergey Esenin was killed by the secret police or hung himself. Gay poet Mikhail Kuzmin's lover Yurkun was arrested twice and executed the second time after Kuzmin's death because of his association with the well known and open poet.

Toward the latter part of her life, Parnok said: "Now I look at poetry as just a means of communication with people. I am happy there is an eternal language, beyond time, in which I can explain myself, and in which I can sometimes find words everyone can understand."

How do we know of Parnok today if she was silenced? In 1979, when it was still impossible to publish Parnok in Soviet Russia, a professor of Byzantine and classical literature at Leningrad University, Sophia Polyakova, took great risks to research, collect, and finally

publish—in the U.S.—an annotated edition of Parnok's poems. In addition, in 1983 an amazing book documenting Tsvetaeva's and Parnok's lesbian poems and their lesbian relationship, *Sunset Days of Yore* [*Zakatnye ony dni: Tsvetaeva i Parnok*] was published by Ardis Press in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The material was smuggled across the Soviet Union's border and it traveled by a kind of underground railroad to its own "coming out." It was only after the publication of the Russian *Sunset Days of Yore* in Michigan that Parnok's work became available to Russian speakers through samizdat circles. The book also made clear the fact of Parnok's and Tsvetaeva's sexual orientations and their relationship. This queer reading of Tsvetaeva, and of same-sex love, had never before been discussed by a Russian national. It was revolutionary.

During my initial travels to Russia in the early 1990s, I began to read more of Marina Tsvetaeva's work with a queer eye, not having seen Polyakova's book. Back home in California, U.C. Berkeley professor Simon Karlinsky, gay scholar and Tsvetaeva expert, became a friend. His inspiration was key in learning about Polyakova's work, as well as Tsvetaeva and Parnok. Simon told me he had a hand in getting Polyakova's book published by Ardis. We talked about Parnok and Tsvetaeva as if they were famous neighbors. I read with relish his own book on Tsvetaeva, the first important study of this poet, and we talked about other queer Russian writers.

A well-read copy of Polyakova's important book is still in my library. Unlocking references in Tsvetaeva's "Girlfriend" poems and in Parnok's poems to Tsvetaeva, Polyakova includes commentary and details of the poets' lives. In 1993, I had the good fortune to meet with Sophia Polyakova in her home in St. Petersburg, which she shared with her woman partner. Polyakova told me how she scoured small used bookstores over many years to collect and preserve Sophia Parnok's poetry and other forgotten writings. When I met with her she was completing a volume of Parnok's poetry to be published for the first time in Russia.

Polyakova explained that "lyric poets had become outcasts during the early Soviet period because of counter-revolutionary tendencies of the lyric mode which emphasized personal feelings." Polyakova's rescue of Parnok's work, as well as her *Sunset Days* book, were done in secret because of continued Soviet repression. Stalin's isolationist beliefs caused lines of communication with the West to be broken in disciplines such as psychology, history, and philosophy, as well as in literature and the arts. The loss of this knowledge was being repaired during perestroika. During the 1990s, Parnok's poetry could finally be published for the first time, and her sexuality could be spoken of openly. Polyakova was happy to be alive to see this day, she told me.

In our meeting, Polyakova spoke in a relaxed way about her research, even flirting with me at times. Then, reaching into her files, she presented me with copies of photos of Tsvetaeva and Parnok. She used the word *saficheski* (Sapphic) often our conversation when referring to their relationship. She came from another era. Code words were common in Soviet Russia, but the current code words were *goluboy* for “gay” and *rozovaya* for “lesbian.” She said how glad she was to meet me and other *saficheski* women researchers. When I asked, she admitted she used the word out of habit. She thought it expressed Tsvetaeva and Parnok’s relationship better than the more modern words. “Like lesbian?” I asked. She smiled.

Her humor and lightness came out even more during our tea with her partner, who served some tasty snacks. They bantered in an intimate way, making little in-jokes. I behaved as if I understood. We talked about Russia and some of the people I was meeting and about our mutual interest in the two great poets. We toasted, and then Polyakova asked her partner if she had “noticed Sonechka’s [my] blue eyes.” As a lesbian couple surviving Soviet times into old age and still used to being circumspect, the queer nuances did not escape me. Sophia Polyakova was helping to build and revive Russian lesbian culture: “If there is one thing of worth I have done in my life, it is saving Parnok’s work from obscurity,” were her parting words to me.

Sophia Parnok’s relationship with Marina lasted only two years, but it was very intense. Inspiring one another, the two women wrote each other poetry and shared much in common, as Polyakova depicted in her book. They traveled to the beautiful Crimea, often to Koktebel and Sudak, where Maximilian Voloshin and other artists gathered. When the pair parted in 1916, Tsvetaeva called it “the first great catastrophe of my life.”

Following Tsvetaeva, Parnok had other great loves: actress Lyudmila Erarskaya, mathematics professor Olga Tsuberbiller, singer Marina Maksakova. She dedicated poems to these women, including very personal and erotic details in her verse. To Maksakova, whose first name was the same as Tsvetaeva’s, Parnok wrote a poem for Tsvetaeva: “How strange that you remind me so of her!”

But I’ve forgiven her,
And I love you, and through you, Marina,
The vision of the one who shares your name.

Parnok’s appreciation of women and literature is a gift to us all. In 1933 she died of heart problems in the village of Kirinsky, outside Moscow, with her lover and other friends at her side. Parnok’s friends did not forget and met afterwards on a regular basis to share their

recollections and Sophia's poetry at the home of Olga Tsuberbiller. Commenting on Parnok's final years in her book, Polyakova writes: "The relationship with Vedeneyeva [her last love] was both the most tragic [because it was short] and the most brilliant time of her life: already on the threshold of death, she found the fullness of love and creativity, the greatest blessings on earth."



Kaleidoscope for Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941)

Marina, my stomach hurts,
I cry like a baby for mama,
The song on the radio reminds me of
The love I can never have, the love

I seek from one lover to the next.
You did that too—from lover to lover,
even the ones you never met,
till your heart ached apart.

You fell in love with strangers,
dangers. You were always losing
people. I am too. Always the most,
and the best, and the worst.

First it was Sonya Parnok,
then Sonya Holliday—
“Do you still love me?” you wrote
in a card to the dying Rilke—

You never even met him.
And I’ve never met you.
I turn a page of your poetry
and my life comes into focus—

Words lullaby and vie
in flying lines, lurking questions:
Bylo telo, khotelo zhit’.
(There was a body, it wanted to live),

BODY WANTING LIFE.
Bylo telo, khotelo zhit’.

I know what that’s like. Maniacal.
Even the lovers—how many—
they leave, thigh shuddering,
pursue, pursue, running in a corral—

Thoughts that beat away sleep.

I feel sick
but I love that
lurching sea of surprises
I get tossed around.
So familiar, like a bed,
I never, I never

Get sick to my stomach,
never, on those storm-swept
sheets, my lovely disheveled
blankets. Don't go
My kitten winks at me,
high above my bed.

Marina! Are you listening to me?
Have I lost you to your gloom and worry?
My heart beats on your door. You're not
there. You ended it all with a rope from a beam.

Was it the years of grief shattering you—
shunned by your beloved son and others over and over?
Or Russia in the 1940s, the impossibility of exile?
And the endless rain,
The wants that make your body

hurt. Mama!
Speak to me! No, this is pointless.
Sophia means wisdom—
You knew that too when you found
those other Sonyas—the real Sonyas—
I deserve to be loved by the living.

I blink at my reflection. Oh what an eyeful!
The sea, the same old sea will always be there,
my thigh
always liable.

And your poems

I kiss you full on the lips, there's salt
and a tender fullness,
my tongue
searches for more.

*I know the truth! All former
truths are through!
People on earth don't need to
fight one another.
Come look at the evening.
Come look! Soon it will be
night.
What is the problem—Poets,
Lovers, Generals?*

*Already the wind is quiet,
already the earth is dressed in
dew,
The storm of stars in the sky
will soon be still,
And we'll all sleep together
under the earth,
We who wouldn't let each other
sleep above it.*

—October 3, 1915

Marina Tsvetaeva was born in Moscow on October 8, 1892 to an intellectual family, her mother a pianist, and her father an art history professor. She began writing poetry at the age of six and produced her first book of poems, *Evening Album*, at the young age of eighteen. Noticed by several important literary figures in Russia, she became part of the literary scene. She met Sergey Efron, a poet at the time, and married and had two children. She had many loves during her lifetime. When life became very difficult (she lost one of her daughters in the post-revolutionary famine), and perhaps for political reasons (her husband, Sergey Efron, had fought against the Bolsheviks and emigrated to Berlin at the end of the 1917 revolution), Marina and her surviving daughter left for Europe in 1922 to join Sergey another child was born. Years later, the family returned to Russia and each of them to tragic fates. Marina took her own life in 1941.

I am glad she lived and wrote, as are many others. My life is richer because of Tsvetaeva. Reading and translating her work has given me such pleasure. I could say I learned Russian because of her. Meditating on her poetry, her lines, her wordplay, and her prose,

bring me to another place. Rambling on in her conversational manner, she let herself go in writing. So inspiring! I went to her home on Borisoglebsky pereulok in Moscow several times, in 1992 and 1993, when supporters were just setting things up, but I saw and felt her more in her poetry, in her writing, and in details of her life.

With her mischievous eyes and brown hair turned up at the ends, Marina, who let herself love women and question gender roles, was encouraged in her passion and originality in her youth in Russia. Her connection with and interest in women emerged early in her life. In 1911 she fell in love with Asya Turgeneva, a friend of her youth, and described her with an eye on gender variance—a leopard skin on her shoulder, “her male businesslike air.” But “she is going away, you see, and I will lose her, lose her affection. And there was a nobler, deeper feeling: a longing for the whole race, the lament of the Amazons for the one who was going away, going over onto that other shore, for the sister departing—to them.”

The wild artist Maximilian Voloshin, whose mother was a cross-dresser, invited Marina to join his circle (*kruzhok*) of artists in Sudak in the Crimea, overlooking the Black Sea, and she fit in well. There she met her husband Sergey, poets Adelaida Gertsyk, Osip Mandelshtam, and many others. She even brought her lover, poet Sophia Parnok, to Voloshin’s dacha in 1915. In reviewing Marina’s first book of poetry, dedicated to the artist Maria Bashkirtseva, Voloshin wrote “Tsvetaeva does not think, she lives in her verse.” And she herself captured her own approach to poetry as follows: “The poem writes itself through me.”

Marina’s independence and radical spirit were powerful. As Nadezhda Mandelshtam, the wife of the great Russian Jewish poet Osip (with whom Marina had a brief affair), described her: “she was absolutely natural and fantastically self-willed. I have a vivid recollection of her cropped hair, loose-limbed gait—like a boy’s—and speech remarkably like her verse.” Marina liked to shock people, quite attracted to the image of the Amazon, and at times displaying a certain masculinity in her appearance.

On the other hand, Marina’s daughter Ariadna described her mother in emigration as deeply isolated. Many people visited her and thought highly of her writing, but in general Marina distanced herself from the rumormongering and backbiting rampant in the Russian émigré community. In addition, she was poor during her years in Europe. She took translating jobs that paid little but helped make ends meet. Valentin Bulgakov, the last secretary of the great novelist Leo Tolstoy, came to visit her in Prague; he worked with her and wrote a piece about her (quoted in Ariadna’s book):

I never saw her crying or even despondent. At times she could be sad, complain of her fate—for example, of her separation from Russia, of being overburdened with housework and household affairs that distract her from her literary work—but those (on the whole, rare) complaints and discontents of hers never sounded regretful or pitiful; on the contrary, they were always proud, I would even say defiant: defiant of fate and of people. In the not just poor but literally destitute setting of her apartment, Marina Ivanovna moved like a queen: calm and with confidence.

Her marriage, neither ideal or typical, survived even though Marina and Sergey spent many years apart. They had three children together: Ariadna (Alya), Irina, and later a son, Mur. Alone during the years of War Communism in Russia, when food, money, and work were scarce, she put her daughters in a state orphanage out of desperation, thinking they would be better taken care of, but little Irina died of malnutrition in 1920.

During that period of famine in Soviet Russia, Marina was close to the actress Sonechka Golidey but their relationship broke off. Years later, she wrote the novella *Story About Sonechka*, about the gay theater world in Moscow. When Marina and Ariadna emigrated to Europe in 1922, Sergey was very involved in White Russian (anti-Bolshevik) political work and later began spying for the Soviets. He personally participated in the murder of Trotsky's son in Paris. Upon his return to the USSR in 1937 under orders from the NKVD (predecessor of the KGB), he was sent to the gulag. Meanwhile, Marina was not happy or easy to be with, but she continued writing and having affairs, moving from Berlin to Prague, to city and to countryside, and finally settling in Paris.

Writing in 1938, at the beginning of the war and the holocaust in Europe, she reflected the political situation in her poems:

Oh tears in my eyes!
 Lament of anger and of love!
Oh Czechoslovakia in tears!
 Spain in blood!

Oh Black Mountain
 Darkening—the world!
It's time—time—time—to
 Return my ticket to the creator.

The rhyme in the original is lost in English, but the two verses are

chantlike in Russian. The Black Mountain might be the Germans or simply the dark threat of Nazism and Fascism. Like her contemporary Virginia Woolf in England, Marina was very sensitive to and aware of the times she was living in, and felt the despair all around her. Unfortunately, by 1939, Marina was preparing to go back to Russia, which was no better than Europe and maybe worse. Was she already thinking about taking her life even as she yearned to return to Russia? Leaving seventeen years of emigration behind, she was going to a country where Stalin was putting people in prison camps and killing them for no reason. It was as if she was going to her grave in the Soviet Union, though she thought she was joining her husband, ostensibly ill in Moscow, and her daughter. (Marina's sister had already been arrested and sent to a prison camp.) A few months after Marina arrived, Ariadna was mysteriously arrested and Sergey was eventually shot in October 1941.

Beginning to grasp the utter tragedy that was occurring in Russia, Marina had difficulty getting help and support in her transition, simply because people lived in unimaginable fear. Boris Pasternak, a fellow writer and Marina's correspondent over many years, lived near Moscow but his friendship couldn't help her. She began to do translations and work for a publisher. She couldn't get her things from Europe because she was in a temporary living situation. Her young son was the only reason she kept struggling to survive and establish herself.

Perhaps remembering the good times in Moscow before 1922, she tried to form another passionate relationship through letters with a new acquaintance, Tanya, a young Muscovite. To love was still her foremost purpose in life. She even recalled Sophia Parnok in a letter to Tanya: "What I need from a person—is love! 'I need you like bread.' No, I cannot imagine better words from a person. No, I do: 'I need you like air.'" She explained that this had been her mantra twenty years earlier, when she was "the self that belonged to Sonechka." Tanya did not become one of her lovers but stayed a friend, listening to Marina's strange thoughts.

It is hard to imagine the times Marina lived in—how she responded to the war and confusion and tried to go on living and writing. During the Nazi attacks on Moscow in 1941, people were terrified, and many were evacuated. Marina and her son moved from Moscow to Golytsino, having no residential permit for Moscow, where Marina wanted to be. She finally did gain residency, and was able to work and communicate with other writers, but because of the imminent Nazi attacks, she and her son were evacuated to Yelabuga, a remote village in the Tatar Republic, very far from Moscow. There were a few writers around, but the mood was fearful and depressing.

She had already asked a writer friend to take care of her son in case something happened to her.

On August 31, 1941, she hung herself in her small apartment while her son was not there. She left a note for him saying, “Forgive me, but to go on would be worse. I am gravely ill. This is not me anymore. I found myself in a dead end [*tupik*].” She was only forty-eight. Sadly, her son died soon after, drafted when he came of age and killed in battle in 1944.



St. Petersburg canal

In England, in 1941, Virginia Woolf and her husband were living in their Sussex country house because their London house had been bombed. The great novelist, who had had problems with mental illness, was also depressed about the war and bombings. She took her life by drowning herself a few months before Tsvetaeva's death. Both women were affected by the violent times they lived in and the impossibility of continuing their work—a dead end, as Marina put it. We can never know why anyone kills herself, but the similarities and contexts are striking.

I first encountered the inimitable Marina Tsvetaeva and her poetry about thirty years after her death when I studied Russian at New York University starting in 1971. It was her writing, along with other brilliant Russian literature, that put me on a lifelong path of studying and reading and learning from Russian writers, historians, artists, and revolutionaries. Tsvetaeva held all this and more. She wrote and lived with a passion of her own. When I came upon her nontraditional ideas on gender and sexuality, perfectly evident in her poetry and other writings, she not only became family, but I breathed her, as she breathed Pushkin. Tsvetaeva declared in her prose piece

“My Pushkin” that when she read *Evgeny Onegin*, she fell in love with both Evgeny and Tatyana (and maybe with Tatyana a little more).

Written in 1937, “My Pushkin” is Tsvetaeva’s reflection on her childhood and the roots of her poetic self. Alexander Pushkin was the Shakespeare of Russian poetry and Russians knew his work from childhood. Marina always wanted to go to the Pushkin Memorial in the center of Moscow as a little child, because the poet “infected me with love. The word love.” And the fact of Pushkin, who was part African, is the “opposite of all racist theories,” she said, declaring her love and admiration of black people and the big dark statue in Pushkin Square. In Pushkin’s “To the Sea,” the place where he was exiled near the Black Sea becomes a symbol of the loneliness of love. Marina also loved his famous novel-in-verse, *Evgeny Onegin*, which showed the impossibility of love—how it can be fatal in the end. Pushkin himself died in a duel at the age of thirty-seven.

Revealing how much Pushkin and especially the heroine, Tatyana, taught her about love, Tsvetaeva believed “If there had been no Pushkin’s Tatyana, I would not have come into existence.” From Pushkin and later Proust, she learned the importance of kinship and how strong “a love for a nurse can be.” In “My Pushkin,” Tsvetaeva told her story through Pushkin’s life and works. Four years later her life would end, but her poetry would live on.

In the summer of 1990, in San Francisco I found myself in the throes of an obsessive attraction that was doomed to cause me pain and misery. As often in these difficult moments, I turned to poetry for comfort and guidance. I came to Marina Tsvetaeva’s lesbian cycle of poems in Russian, “*Podruga*” (Girlfriend) which inspired my poem, “Kaleidoscope.” I was fascinated that this woman who wrote in another era in Russia was writing about same-sex love.

Because of this trembling, because—
perhaps I dream a dream?—
Because of this delightful irony,
That you are not he.

As I read these poems, I learned that they were addressed to Sophia Parnok. In 1914, in a Moscow literary salon, Marina, who was married to Sergey Efron at the time, met Sophia, a poet and open lesbian, and became infatuated. Here is my translation of part of one of the “Girlfriend” poems, from December 1914.

How in the convent guesthouse—
With bells resounding and the setting sun—
Carousing like birthday girls, we let loose

Like a regiment of soldiers.

How I vowed to grow more beautiful
With age, for you, and sprinkled salt,
How when three times I threw the king of hearts
You were in such a rage!

How you grabbed my head
And caressed every curl,
How the flower on your little
Enamel brooch cooled my lips.

How I brushed my sleepy cheek
Against your slender fingers,
How you teased me like a boy,
How you liked me that way.

Marina Tsvetaeva's poetry intrigued me by itself and learning about her lesbian relationships and other details of her life drew me even more. Though I was married in those years and came out as a lesbian in my mid-twenties, it was hard to imagine Marina married and with a family yet continuing her non-monogamous and, in today's terms, queer way of life. During perestroika in the 1990s and the opening up of LGBT life for the first time after the fierce repression under Stalin and others, Marina Tsvetaeva quickly became the mother of lesbian love in Russia and the Pushkin of Russian sexual minorities.

Lesbians in Russia who loved Marina, and I, as a Slavic lesbian, shared a bond with Tsvetaeva and Parnok as if we were soul sisters. We would visit Tsvetaeva's house in Moscow and other places associated with Marina and Sophia. I even went to Koktebel and Sudak and their haunts in the Crimea to connect with their spirits, and I hummed the rhythms and uttered the unusual sounds of their poems. Songs based on their poetry were sung and recorded by Elena Frolova and Vera Evushkina (as Verlen and as separate musicians) as well as other bard poets. These images and sounds reverberated in me. Although it is difficult to capture the rhythms of Tsvetaeva's poetry for English speakers, I translated some of her poems as a way of understanding her more deeply and published them so that others could enjoy her words and thoughts. Healing, affirming, validating—her work made me feel I was not alone in my mad (*bezumnye*) Sapphic thoughts. Writing could anchor me as it did her. "What is writing but translating," said Marina to her friend and correspondent German poet Rainer Maria Rilke in 1926.

It is difficult for me to convey the intensity of my desire to tell others about Sophia and Marina; my body actually shudders with excitement at their writings and their accomplishments. These women were in a sense advocating for women and for same-sex and alternative relationships a hundred years ago simply by living their lives. Sophia died in Sudak surrounded by her women friends. Marina's interest in women was not hidden, nor was her eroticism or her play with gender. With her nontraditional queer sensibility, she wrote about Amazons, women's breasts, gay actors in the Vakhtangov theater group who were friends with her beloved Sonechka Golidey in the 1920s in Moscow, and more. I wondered how she could be portrayed by most academics in the late twentieth century so exclusively as the wife of Sergey Efron and mother of a family!

While Ariadna Efron, who lived with Marina during all the moves and changes, rarely mentions her mother's queer relationships, Ariadna herself spent about twenty-five years with a woman she met in the gulag, Ada Federolf. After witnessing her mother's many passionate relationships, Ariadna was a victim of internalized homophobia and could not talk openly about her own relationship; the shame and criminalization were too strong in the Soviet Union during her lifetime. However, all of Ariadna's youth was spent with Tsvetaeva. When sent to a Stalinist camp back in the USSR, Ariadna was given two terms of about eight years each in the camps. In her memoir about her mother, called *No Love Without Poetry*, Ariadna ends by saying, "Before you have the right to love poetry, you have to love the poet herself." She loved her mother, with all her quirks and affairs but how did she reconcile this with her time in the gulag. Perhaps Ariadna found solace in her love for Ada Federolf.

As I read Marina's passionate letter to Salomeya Halpern, a woman Marina loved in emigration, the distinct trembling I feel and my emotions move me to rise and walk around. Writing about Tsvetaeva has that effect on me. This morning, as I decided what to quote from her letter to Salomeya, the physical, erotic, even spiritual impact of Marina's life and work course through me. I can feel her presence, her spirit. While I walk around the room, I get a lump in my throat. Her passion is palpable.

Dear Salomeya, I saw you in my dreams last night. I had such love and such longing, such mad love and longing, that my first thought upon awakening was: where have I been all these years; I've loved her [you] so much (at one time even more than now). And the first thing I wanted to do when I awoke was to tell you that: my last dream of the night (dreamed in the early morning), and my first thought in the

morning.

Was the dream her reality? These lines of passion for Salomeya were not the first Marina wrote to her. Salomeya was a Georgian/Russian socialite and inspiration for several artists in the pre-revolutionary Silver Age in St. Petersburg. Later in Paris, she was a muse and benefactor to Marina. This letter was written by forty-year-old Marina with three children and an absent husband. Rumors about a possible love affair between the two women had already been flying about the émigré community, but there were other rumors about Tsvetaeva's many affairs. More from the letter:

...Loving so, so, so much, like I loved you in my dream last night (is so impossible)—I could never—you mean a him!—never, not a single him, not in any waking state. Only a woman (my own kind). Only in dreams (in freedom). And the face of my longing is a woman's face.

Marina believed her dreams. as I do. Why are dreams not considered valid or real aspects of our daily lives?

The letter captures her love for women, her obsession with that love, and her absolute acceptance of that love as real and significant, whether or not there was a physical relationship with Salomeya. Marina expressed similar infatuations with various women all her life. It is estimated that she wrote 125 letters just to Salomeya. In 1932 she also wrote the revealing "Letter to an Amazon," a long letter in French addressed to Natalie Barney, an expatriate American writer and lesbian socialite in Paris, in which she explores an imaginary long-term lesbian relationship. She is wistful throughout. Women eventually want to have children, she writes, so the younger woman inevitably leaves the older one for a man who can help her with that. And what about love? She implies that marriage is not about love but about having a family and that love cannot be the basis for a marriage. These are some of Tsvetaeva's rationalizations and musings that were not known to the public until after perestroika.

I translated "Letter to an Amazon" with the help of my dear friend in Moscow, Elena Grigorievna Gussyatinskaya, a French translator and organizer of the highly regarded Moscow LGBT Archives. We worked in her apartment near the Rechnoy Vokzal metro station, using the original French and a Russian translation published in Paris in the 1960s. I enjoyed this process immensely—discussing with Lena Marina's words and concepts in French and Russian and then finding the right words in English. For me as a writer, it truly was an exciting adventure and a new creation. Translating a poet's works is like writing poetry. Tsvetaeva's comment to Rilke rang true,

that all writing is translation, in the sense that we are translating something going on in the mind and heart into words. And the same is true from one language to another.

At the end of “Letter to an Amazon” Marina writes:

Then again, one day, the one who was once young will learn that somewhere at the other end of this very earth the older one has died. At first she will want to write in order to know. But time hurries on—the letter is frozen in time. Desire remains desire. The “I want to know” becomes “I would like to,” then “I don’t want to anymore”—and so what? Since she has died. Since I, too, will die someday. And courageously, with the great honesty of indifference—For she has been dead within me, for me—already twenty years now?”

It’s not necessary to die in order to be dead.

Island. Summit. Solitary.

Weeping willow! Inconsolable willow! Willow—the body and soul of woman! Inconsolable neck of willow. Gray hair falling over her face, so she cannot see anything. Gray hair sweeping the face of the earth.

Water, air, mountains, trees are given to us in order to understand the human soul, so profoundly hidden away. When I see how a willow despairs, I understand Sappho.

Marina revised “Letter to an Amazon” in 1934, after the death of Sophia Parnok. Many of us followers believe she never got over her love for Sophia. Her anger and hurt at Sophia’s betrayal in going off with another woman is evident in this piece as well as other writings in the years preceding Marina’s suicide. In a letter written just before her death, about a dream from Sophia Polyakova’s book, *Sunset Days of Yore*, Marina says, “I saw her with her stupid woman-friend and her very naive poems.” Before this she said quite seriously that Sophia was the first great catastrophe of her life. Her disappointment with Russia and her life in emigration, her disconnectedness from writers, and perhaps many other factors, psychological and global, affected Marina at the agonizing moment of deciding to kill herself in 1941.

In the mid 1920s she wrote two great long poems—“Poem of the Mountain” and “Poem of the End”—essentially about grief and pain and isolation. In a memorable comparison, she wrote: “In this most Christian of worlds/ All poets are Jews.” (This recalls her statement in honor of Pushkin that all poets are Negroes.) Shortly after reading these poems, her friend Boris Pasternak, who thought so highly of

Marina as an artist, tried to connect her with the great Rainer Maria Rilke. A triangular path of letters made their way from Pasternak in a Moscow suburb to Marina's address in Paris to Rilke in Switzerland. Marina was introduced to a Rilke who loved Russian culture. And thus began their three-way intense letter writing and Marina's own fantasy relationship with Rilke. The creative and spiritual level of these relationships—a kind of heart connection that became poetry—was quintessential Marina. Letters, poems, life were all one. Defying boundaries, with the Soviet Union closed off from Europe because of politics and the great distances at that time, these letters are part of her oeuvre.

Primarily a poet, Marina could not separate her work from love. She knew Rilke was not well but she asked him to come to Paris and sleep with her. When Rilke wrote his "Elegy for Marina Tsvetaeva" advocating for a kind of non-possessive love, she said in a 1926 letter, "All my life I have given myself away in poems—to all." In the same letter she wrote that she loved him and that the "next dog you pet will be me." In their correspondence, she said, "Writing poetry is itself translating, from the mother tongue into another," declaring she was "not a Russian poet." There is no nationality in poetry.

Her relationship with Rilke was not romance but a passion for a kindred spirit. In an analysis by psychologist Alice Miller, Rilke's relationship with his mother is highlighted. She treated him like a girl because of her extreme grief following the death of her daughter, dressing him like a girl and calling him girls' names. I have often wondered if his gender perception played into his connection with Marina. Marina's actual knowledge of this aspect of his life may have been limited, but she clearly sensed and loved that feminine part of him, which in turn may have given him comfort. Her last postcard, crossing borders as Rilke died, read: "Dear Rainer, This is where I live. Do you still love me? Marina." Always this question—do you still love me—especially while living in poverty and writing in isolation.

Life and love are not the same. Love can continue after life, without life. For Marina, there is a spirituality in love. It goes beyond the physical. When Marina writes in her long "Poem of the End,"

The body that once wanted to live/Wants to live no longer.

she rejects this idea in the next line with "Forgive me! I didn't mean that!"—conscious of all that is going on around her, the condemned and "those playing chess." Are we all pawns in the game of life? In view of the fact of her suicide, the lines are haunting, though written in 1924 and referring to the end of an affair with Konstantin Rodzevich. It is a poem of grief.

Marina's metaphysical approach is similar to Rilke's. Listen to his inscription to her in a copy of the *Duino Elegies*:

We touch each other; how? With wingstrokes,
With distances themselves we touch each other.
One sole poet lives, and now and then
The one who bore him and who bears him now will meet.

They touched on some other plane. They understood one another. Rilke was dying and Marina still had time left before her end in 1941. What determines one's will to live? The body wants life. People need one other another. Writing was Marina's all. Without analyzing why, Marina came to a dead end—*tupik*. And we have her writings.



Interview with Me

Ksiusha and Lena and I were on our way to Pobeda, a small village outside Moscow where people had dachas. We were going to visit our mutual friends Lena and Sveta, who had lived there as a couple for twenty years in Soviet Russia. We made a stop to buy cheese, chocolates, canned fish, and wine to contribute to dinner.

We got back on the Kiev Road toward Pobeda. It was a long drive with possible traffic jams ahead. I had the back seat to myself, Lena drove, while Ksiusha from the front seat said, "I'd like to interview Sonja for a change. She's always interviewing everybody. Why don't you tell us the story of how you came out?"

"Yes, Sonja!" said Lena with a smile, her eyes riveted to the road, her hands gripping the wheel of her red Lada.

I felt flattered. "You mean I never told you my coming-out story?"

"No, tell us," said Ksiusha, settling back in her seat. Lena turned off the radio.

"Well, it all started in Russia, you know. Here, in Moscow! I was on a trip in the summer of 1977 with some people from London, some young people, political people, and I met an American woman who would be my first woman lover. She was so beautiful in my eyes—tall with short dark hair, friendly, interested in people, broad shoulders and lovely full breasts. When I met her and she seemed to want to spend time with me, I remember thinking, 'She's so beautiful and confident, and I'm this boring married woman with glasses. Why would she want to speak with little old me?'

"At the time I was married to a physics professor who had a grant to do research in England, at the University of Birmingham. I had been dreaming about women for a couple of years on and off. I thought about how gentle and smooth women were, so soft, lovely long hair, the one in my dreams, with her full breasts against mine, the nest of her pubic hair against me, in my dreams.

"Anyway, that was what I wanted, but I had no idea how I could meet other women like me. I had been married for over six years and was living in a very tame community near Palo Alto, California, a suburb of a suburb. I was a writer and student, each evening waiting for my husband, a dedicated atomic physicist who sometimes spent the night with his experiments. I was going to U.C. Berkeley graduate school myself, but my life seemed to revolve around him nonetheless, and I didn't want it to."

"I didn't know you were married for six years!" Lena piped up from the driver's seat, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

"Yes, I was. But everything changed while we were in England.

Birmingham was an industrial city north of London, but close to Shakespeare country and the Cotswolds. I loved the English countryside, the lush rolling hills and the little steps that helped you cross fences designed for cattle. I would go to London often by train and roam around. I was doing a translation project for Leonid Rzhevsky, my Russian professor in the New York University Graduate program. For the most part, though, I felt bored and restless. Something was brewing inside. In England, not only did my dreams about women persist, but I was reading about the new women's movement and feeling dissatisfied with my marriage.

"Before leaving my graduate studies at Berkeley and while I was still married, I met a gorgeous long-haired Italian poet and had an affair with him. One day out of the blue, after we made love, he asked me if I ever felt sexually interested in women. I was shocked by the question and he didn't wait for my answer. He began to talk about his interest a guy we both knew. He did not seem surprised when, breathing deeply, I finally said, 'I'm attracted to women.' We kidded about setting each other up with same-sex partners."

"Was that the first time you said something to someone?" asked Ksiusha.

"No, actually my husband knew about my feelings before that. At about the same time as the Italian affair, I made friends with a gay man in the Russian Department who talked to me a lot about his lifestyle. I kept asking him questions about how he met men, trying to learn about my possibly fitting into this strange queer culture, but the image of being at a dance or a bar or an open meeting place scared me. I never said a word to my gay friend about my feelings toward women. Several years later, we happened to meet on the street in Berkeley and I revealed to him that I had come out; he told me he had never suspected a thing about me at the time.

"So when I met Gina in Russia, you can imagine how thrilled I was. She was the woman of my dreams." Both Ksiusha and Lena smiled and hollered, "Ura!" (Hurray!)

"I must have recognized something in her. I felt a spark, but I never dreamed anything would come to fruition. We were on a two-week tour through the Soviet Union—Moscow, Leningrad, and Tallinn, Estonia. One day Gina and I were walking alone on the riverbank in Narva, near Tallinn. While the river rushed by, there were some boys skimming rocks on the water. As we walked on the pebbly shore, she said to me, 'Have you ever thought about making love to a woman?'

"Was this really happening to me? I thought. I don't remember answering. She talked on. My mind was racing and tears worked their way to my eyes. As we walked up the hill to town, the setting sun was

facing us. She said, 'I hope you didn't think I was coming on to you when we talked about being interested in women.' I was already feeling that irrepressible rush, and now my eyes were really filling with tears. 'What's the matter?' she asked. I said the sun was very bright and we walked on, with her doing most of the talking. We stopped at a little cafe before we returned to the dorm-like place we were staying in. The coffee was too sweet for me—they sold it presweetened. I didn't finish it."

"But when did IT happen?" Ksiusha asked with excitement, as Lena glanced at the rearview mirror.

"That night we were alone in our room. Our roommate was spending the night with her boyfriend. It must have been our time. Gina and I each lay in our own beds in the dark. We chatted for a while, then fell silent. I didn't know how I was going to sleep that night; I was so wound up with excitement. I tossed and turned. I thought, 'If she says one more word, I'm going over to her bed.'

"And she did. 'You seem restless.'

"I literally flung the covers off me and ran to her bed. I bent over her and experienced an unforgettable wash of relief as I hugged and kissed her and she reciprocated. It's all that happened that night but two nights later we were in Moscow and decided not to go to the circus with the rest of the group. We made love in our hotel room overlooking the city. It was everything I had dreamed and more—warm and gentle and so full of knowing. There was no turning back. It opened my life."

Silence. A kind of reverence. I said, "The day before, we kissed for the first time while we were taking a walk in Lenin Hills, of all places."

"Vorobyovy Gory? [The old name in Russian]" repeated Ksiusha in surprise, and Lena chortled behind the wheel. The park was the highest point in Moscow, with a panoramic view of the river, the Kremlin, and the city. We talked of how momentous it must have been to kiss a woman in 1977, in the Soviet Union, right there in the open, where many lovers had come to profess their love. My friends knew how important Moscow and Russia was to me.

"Gina and I took a side trip by ourselves to Zagorsk, to the historic Trinity Lavra monastery-fortress a half hour from Moscow by train. Our Soviet tour guide was hesitant to let us go—after all, he was responsible for us. With my knowledge of Russian we would be okay, I said. We took off like two girlfriends getting permission from a parent or teacher to do something no one was allowed.

"Zagorsk was majestic and brilliant with its tiered gold cupolas and white stone walls. It was another world from the crowded streets of Moscow. It was a quiet, ancient, spiritual world, allowed to exist in

a circumscribed way. I remember walking around inside the fortress seeing occasional dark-robed figures, older women in kerchiefs pensively on their way to pray. We saw two middle-aged women walking arm in arm and talking in an intimate way, so I took Gina's arm with a sudden burst of boldness. We bragged to each other about how free we felt in the Soviet Union.

"A man was working on an oil painting of the Cathedral of the Assumption, where Boris Godunov was buried. I asked the artist to take our picture with my camera. I still have the photo—our eyes glistening, our smiles ear to ear, his easel next to us. Arm in arm, we show each other off. I'll never forget how romantic it all felt—to be among those shiny cathedrals that had survived in the Soviet Union, to have my dreams come true, to be in love."

"And what happened with your husband?" asked Lena.

"Well, I told him as soon as I returned home." I grew sad remembering the difficulties. "He didn't take me seriously at first. Or maybe he couldn't. But I moved out and got my own apartment in San Francisco when we got back to California, and Gina and I continued our relationship for a couple of years. I explored the wonderful lesbian world in San Francisco, which I think was at its height then, in the late 1970s and I became a political activist. I was very fortunate.

"I remembered how a poet helped me when I was having trouble leaving all that my husband and I had built together to start a new life. It was W.H. Auden. Do you know his name?"

"Ah yes," said Ksiusha. "Wasn't he gay?"

"I took his collected works from my shelf in my husband's and my house and it just fell open to this page—a sign! I listened. His words gave me courage. I still can recite some of the lines:

Underneath an abject willow,
Lover, sulk no more:
Act from thought should quickly follow.
What is thinking for?
Your unique and moping station
Proves you cold;
Stand up and fold
Your map of desolation.

"How do you think coming out changed your life?" Ksiusha asked.

"A great question. You know, I tried to get an interview with a woman in Tomsk once, and she declined, saying the label lesbian was narrow—she said she was much more than a lesbian. I knew being open and true to myself felt like an opening, not at all a restricting.

The woman had lost her job at the university because of her sexual orientation. I tried to explain that it was the university administration that was narrow-minded, not the label. Of course any kind of label is confining, but the best way to build a new life is to connect with others and widen your circle. What better way than to come out?

“To say you are a lesbian means you have left the traditional fold, you have moved out of the box society gives us and over to new possibilities. In turn, this new adventure can offer others a model for a more creative and independent life. Yes, it takes courage to come out, but it also means you want more out of life. You don’t want to settle for what is acceptable.

“When I was interviewed by gay.ru [the central popular website for Russian LGBTs], the journalist entitled the piece ‘Sonja Franeta Who Loves the Word Lesbian.’ Although I did say something like that in the interview, what I meant was that I embraced the word and didn’t reject it. We have plenty of labels in language and society. They are just a way of talking about something. Remember what Tsvetaeva said—everything is a translation! We translate our thoughts in order to speak about them. A label is a translation.

“I also strongly believe that coming out has put me on an amazing journey. I became an activist, not only for LGBTs but for all oppressed people, first and foremost for women and for working-class people, my people, advocating for those countries oppressed by the U.S. military and the CIA, for black civil rights and for the poor and for marginalized people. I became more keenly aware of what was going on in the world and the historical context. I became educated in class politics which changed my life.

“I saw history differently—the oppression of LGBTs (and women) was important to keep the family in place, the bulwark of capitalism. I still am close to Che Guevara’s famous quote: ‘At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a feeling of love.’

“After about twelve years of full-time activism, I followed my heart once again and emerged as a writer. It was poet Judy Grahn who was a mentor to me when I returned to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1987. She said the only way to be a writer is to ‘take yourself seriously as a writer.’ That’s right. I am a writer and I have enjoyed writing and sharing my writing, my translations. At that time I met other writers and friends, political and not, who helped me feel confident in my transition to being a more dedicated writer.

“When I traveled to Russia to learn more in 1991 and connect with sexual minorities, it was with all of my Slavic background, my literary interests, my political activism, and my appreciation for queer lives that I approached my interviews and other work in Russia. A

great feeling of love! My mind was opened further—I learned that someone could be a transsexual or transgender and also be a lesbian. Was there any translation for this fluid identity I was hearing about? I learned that people who lived under an enormous stultifying blanket of silence could live their lives like flowers in a forgotten garden. They were becoming connected, internationalized, and I was part of it. This was all for the better, all human progress, even if it goes back a few steps for a while. We will emerge so much better for all this.”

As we neared Lena and Sveta’s dacha, Ksiusha said to Lena, “She has a Slavic soul, doesn’t she?” I smiled and thought to myself: really I am a citizen of the world. The simple old wooden dachas with rundown yards surrounded us. Lena and Sveta would greet us warmly and we would soon have tea and other goodies.

I found myself thinking of a much-quoted phrase, perhaps from a civil rights chant, that June Jordan used as the last line of a 1978 poem about South African women standing up against apartheid: “We are the ones we have been waiting for!”

Acknowledgments and Notes

Many friends and professionals helped with editing and critiquing these pieces. Rarely does a writer work get completely alone, and I have thrived on the comments and suggestions of those who have worked with me and the words and discussions of many.

First I want to thank all those who shared their stories and life struggles with me in Russia, Siberia and the Ukraine. Thanks to Judy Grahn, who helped get me started on my journey as a writer. Thank you to all my fellow writers, collaborators, and editors along the way: Nancy Fishman, Chude Allen, Gail Sher, Elana Dykewomon, Norma Smith, Jeff Goldthorpe, Regina Mouton, Aubrey Cramer, Tracy Thompson, Anastasia Kirichenko, Olgerta Kharitonova, Elena Gusyatsinskaya, Sveta Barabanova, Viktor Pismenny, Stephanie Vandrick, Cathy Cade, Cheiron McMahill, Olya Teslenko, Martha Lunney, Ilse Fuskova-Kornreich, Susana Blaustein Muñoz, Lucy Jane Bledsoe, Nancy McKenzie, Janet Bogardus, Mary Wagner, Lisa Carruthers, Fanchon Lewis, Judy Reeves, Gina Cameron. I thank my family: my mother, my sister Nada and her husband Eugene, my brother Tom and wife Emily, Kim Lash-Rosenberg, Lili Lash-Rosenberg, and my partner and spouse, Sue Shallenberger for their love and support.

Thank you to Joy Johannessen, my editor for this book—her suggestions and work have been invaluable. Thank you to Susan Zárate, my cover designer and friend, who did beautiful work with a photo taken by a Russian friend at the old Rechnoy Vokzal river station in Moscow.

A number of these pieces originally appeared, in slightly different form, in various publications: “Imperfect Glass,” in *Writing for Our Lives* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1994); “Survivor,” in *Good News*, a publication of Laney College, Oakland, CA; “After Church,” in *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, no. 43 (Summer 1992); “My Violin Loves to Play,” in *Sinister Wisdom*, no. 49 (Spring/Summer 1993); “Emerging Voices,” originally written for and published in the first issue of the *Journal of Engaged Pedagogy* (Tokyo, September 2001), a bilingual Japanese journal, although edited and produced by English-language professors was nontraditional in the academic sense (how often are poems and coming-out stories included in academic writing?); “The Rest Is Poetry,” in *Good News* (Spring 2006); “Amazon Sisters on the Trans-Siberian Railroad,” in Lucy Jane Bledsoe, ed., *Lesbian Travels: A Literary Companion* (San Francisco: Whereabouts Press, 1998).

“The Pigeons of Heiden,” based on my interview with Mrs. Schubert, ends with a fragment of a quotation from Anne Michaels’s

Fugitive Pieces, which reads in full (spoken by Jakob), “Perhaps the electron is neither particle nor wave but something else instead, much less simple—a dissonance—like grief, whose pain is love.” I sense the universe and the entire struggle of human beings in this quotation.

“My Peasant Roots” takes place in two small villages, Lipovka in southern Russia and Aleksinac in the former Yugoslavia. By way of explanation of the peasantry, its history in both countries is very complex. Serfdom was abolished in Russia in 1861, before the abolition of slavery in the U.S. Then, under the Soviet regime, there was a huge campaign of forced collectivization of agriculture. Whether Lipovka was a remnant of this campaign or of the emancipation of the serfs is not clear. However, these people seemed to be from another era and had developed their own way of survival, without contact with the government, or with others outside the town, for that matter. Meanwhile, in Yugoslavia, the unification of the country following World War II ushered in the longest period of prosperity and stability the area had ever seen. President Tito’s reign was considered a golden age by some and a dictatorship by others. In any case, he did lead the most effective group of partisans fighting the Nazi takeover, and later he rejected Stalin’s form of socialism and led the country on an independent path. The Yugoslav version of the working cooperative or collective farm, of which my father’s family in Aleksinac was a part, featured peasant self-management without reliance on the state, different from the Soviet model.

“Woman Machinist” references a book by Kim Rosen, poet, spoken-word artists and teacher—*Saved by a Poem* on appreciating poetry. She included a short section on how I overcame the boredom of factory work by memorizing and meditating on poetry and my activism.

“Kosovo Diary” was written on a trip I took with women from MOSAIC, an organization devoted to helping women establish and fund their own organizations in different parts of the world. We made connections with the Kosovo Women’s Network, led by Igbal Rugova (Igo in the piece), and we worked in the camps. We focused on women and young people in our workshops and interactions. I also led a workshop as a trainer for Alternatives to Violence. I had been following the Yugoslav war and its effects on women with the help of other contacts, including Lepa Mladjenovic, a Serb lesbian activist who resisted ethnic identification during the war and crossed borders. My understanding of what happened to split up the former Yugoslavia did not match the media’s portrayal, and there was very little anyone could do to stop the terrible killing and violence, stirred up by propaganda. Kosovo Albanians were secondary even during the Yugoslav Socialist Republic, and their legacy became entwined with

the historical moment of the defeat of the Serbs in Kosovo by the Ottoman Turks in the fourteenth century.

Women's advocate and author Eve Ensler came to Kosovo to learn about the struggle and to capture some of the stories for an expanded version of *The Vagina Monologues*, a theater piece which has been successfully produced in many countries and is used as an organizing and empowering tool by women's groups. Eve says that one out of three women in the world experience violence. Following our stay in Kosovo, MOSAIC, our women's group, went to Hungary to meet with a Budapest organization (NANE) devoted to preventing violence against women. I played roles in *The Vagina Monologues* on two occasions when it was produced at Laney College where I work.

"Talking to People in a Township in South Africa" takes place following a period of time when I belonged to the Socialist Workers Party of the U.S. I was an activist working with organizations and unions to build working-class consciousness to fight for our interests. We tried to make a case for a labor party and allied with progressive movements in that direction, bring requests for solidarity from international fighters to our unions. Among the great movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the anti-apartheid movement was galvanizing support internationally, but its fulcrum and inspiration was the internal anti-apartheid movement led by the African National Congress, a socialist organization headed by Nelson Mandela. The Inkatha Freedom Party was another organization that led the freedom fight. Some of the conflicts between the two organizations were alluded to in my conversations, but this was not entirely clear to me at the time. For an understanding of the South African struggle for liberation, the great works of Nelson Mandela are indispensable, especially *Nelson Mandela Speaks: Forging a Democratic, Nonracial South Africa*. I also highly recommend Gillian Slovo's great historical novel, *Ties of Blood*. Slovo, a writer and memoirist, is the daughter of Joe Slovo, leader of the South African Communist Party, and Ruth First, a journalist who was murdered for her anti-apartheid work in 1982.

"The Rest Is Poetry" was published in *Good News*, a publication of Laney College in 2006 and performed as a monologue by Tracy Held Potter in 2007 (included in *Fusion II: Turning Tables*, a performance at Laney College). It was such a thrill to watch Tracy recite my piece! The Argentine poet and activist mentioned at the beginning of the piece is Ilse Fuskova-Kornreich, whom I met in San Francisco in 1988. We translated a joint bilingual manuscript of our poetry (unpublished), and in 1990 we read together with Judy Grahn at Old Wive's Tales, a women's bookstore in San Francisco. Ilse has long been a leader in the Argentine queer movement.

"Revolutionary Romances:" in 1991 a gay newspaper called *Tema*

(*theme* is a code word for queer) was being published in Moscow, as well as other underground or *samizdat* journals. Roman Kalinin, the editor, and Evgeniya Debryanskaya, a political activist, worked with Julie Dorf of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and others to produce The International Gay and Lesbian Symposium and Film Festival (July 23—August 2, 1991). An account of what occurred is available online <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/world/europe/russia/first.soviet.pride-wockner-91> by journalist and delegate Rex Wockner.

“Amazon Sisters on the Trans-Siberian Railroad” was anthologized in Lucy Jane Bledsoe’s *Lesbian Travels* in 1998. Although it’s a travel piece, it includes parts of my interviews with Lena and Asya. The audio and video interviews I have done are in a film archive in my private collection called *The Pink Flamingo Archives*, some of which are available in the Moscow Lesbian and Gay Archives in Moscow and have been shown in 2012 in Space Taiga, St. Petersburg with the *State of Mind* exhibit by Annica Karlsson Rixon & Anna Viola Hallberg.

“Eighteen Years in the Gulag: Interview with Kuzmich” was the longest of the Siberian interviews that Tracy Thompson and I did for a project that never came to fruition—a film and book about queers in Russia transitioning from communism to perestroika. Instead I put together a book of Siberian interviews edited by Moscow LGBT Archives friends Elena Gusyatinskaya, Sveta Barabanova, and Victor Pismenny. Because of the complexity and questions about his violations, Kuzmich’s interview was not included in *Pink Flamingos*. This is its first publication.

“In the Crimea:” a version of this piece appeared in my self-published chapbook, *Berry of a Mountain Bush*, San Francisco (2002). An informative book by an archaeologist on the Amazon phenomenon is Jeannine Davis-Kimball’s *Warrior Woman*.

“Sissies and Queers” is based on a talk I presented on April 13, 2001, at Lancaster University in the U.K., at the second conference of the International Gender and Language Association.

“Who Is Sophia Parnok?” Only after perestroika was Sophia Parnok published in Russia. Scholar Sophia Polyakova’s 1979 courageous book about Parnok and Tsvetaeva’s love affair called *The Sunset Days of Yore* is only available in Russian. My interview with Polyakova appeared in *Ostrov*, the lesbian journal in Moscow.

“Kaleidoscope” uses variations of my name Sonja (which is the Yugoslav spelling of Sonya or Sonia.) In Russian Sophia is the given name and Sonya is a nickname, also Sonechka. In the poem, Tsvetaeva’s lines “bylo telo, xotelo zhit” mean “there was a body, it wanted to live,” an example of her wordplay—*telo* (body) *xotelo*

(wanted). This was Marina's hallmark. The line comes from her intense and dramatic narrative poem "Poem of the End" (1924) about the end of her affair with a Russian White Army officer and friend of her husband, in Prague.

"My Tsvetaeva" I have read many books by and about Tsvetaeva; Simon Karlinsky's and Lily Feiler's biographies are the best. Good translations of Tsvetaeva poetry are difficult to find; some translations are available on the internet. Marina Tsvetaeva's name is sometimes transliterated as Cvetaeva. Translations into English in this book are mine unless otherwise credited.

It is worth quoting Marina Tsvetaeva's vision of the poet without a nation in a letter to Rilke here. The text is from Nina Kossman's "Translator's Note" in Tsvetaeva's *Poem of the End: Selected Narrative and Lyrical Poems*. From Tsvetaeva's letter to Rilke in July 1926:

Goethe says somewhere that one can't create anything worthwhile in a foreign language, yet I've always thought this was wrong... What is writing poetry but translating, from a native [i.e., inner-NK] tongue to a foreign one? — Whether French or German doesn't make any difference. ... For that reason I don't understand why people speak of French, Russian, etc., poets. A poet may write in French yet not be a French poet...I'm not a Russian poet and am always puzzled when I'm seen as one. This is just why one becomes a poet (if it were possible to *become* one, if one were not *born* a poet!)—in order not be French, Russian, etc., in order to be all of them. In other words, one is a poet because one is not French. Nationality—the shutting out and shutting in. Orpheus bursts nationality, or extends its boundaries so far and wide that all (the bygone and the living) are included in it. [translation by N. K.]

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About the Author

Sonja Franeta is a writer, educator and activist born in the Bronx, New York to an immigrant Yugoslav family. She went to St. Nicholas of Tolentine High School and then attended New York University, where she pursued her love of literature and writing. Captivated by the Russian language and its literary masters, she received a Master's in Russian Literature. Sonja continued her studies in Comparative Literature at U.C. Berkeley. Her life changed irrevocably during this period when she came out as a lesbian and became a socialist. Her interest in Russia crystallized after perestroika when she joined the first queer delegation to Russia in 1991. Sonja continued to find ways to be in Russia during the 1990s in its transformative period. She taught English in Moscow, managed a project for wheelchair activists in Central Siberia, and organized the first queer film festival in Tomsk. Her translations and articles about Russian queers, her poems and her memoir essays have appeared in the U.S. and internationally. In 2004 she published *Rozovye Flamingo (Pink Flamingos: 10 Siberian Interviews)*, a book of queer interviews in Russian, in collaboration with friends at the LGBT Archives in Moscow. Sonja plans to translate that book into English. She currently lives in California with her spouse, Sue, and their two cats and loves to write, read, and travel.

Praise for *My Pink Road to Russia*

Sonja Franeta's *My Pink Road to Russia* is a beguiling and heartfelt book—a fascinating pastiche of memoir, poetry, history and cultural studies that opens a window onto the once-hidden world of Russia's queer community. What makes Franeta's work so valuable and haunting is not only her observant and touching portraits of the people she meets—Siberian lesbians, transsexual train conductors, gay men who survived the gulag, and a host of others—but also the reader's awareness that the remarkable flowering of post-Soviet LGBT life and culture, portrayed so eloquently by Franeta in these pages, appears to be disappearing quickly in the current Putin era.

David Tuller, author of Cracks in the Iron Closet

What an inspiration when the American activists came to Russia in 1991! After Sonja Franeta entered the Russian LGBT community, she traveled to Siberia and Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Kaliningrad, capturing the stories and her own impressions of our queer culture. In interviews collected by Sonja for her previous book *Pink Flamingos* we heard the voices of real people. This voice of honesty rings through Sonja's present book of stories. It is particularly valuable in Russia at this time, when we have been forbidden to talk about LGBT issues.

Olga Gert, editor of Moscow feminist journal Ostrov (Island)

Sonja Franeta's latest book, *Pink Road to Russia: Tales of Amazons, Peasants, and Queers*, takes readers on a journey of awakening love from the Bronx to Moscow, through Croatia, South Africa, San Francisco, to Siberia and many other lands in between. True to her teaching profession, Franeta reveals in richly detailed stories how war, family violence, politics and borders are no match for same-sex desire. Allowing readers a rare and poetic glimpse into '70s and '80s U.S., and later post-Soviet, sexuality, she proves that there are no limitations when it comes to expressions of the heart.

Sharon Horne, PhD, writer and researcher of LGBTQ

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Dacha Books

Oakland, California

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ISBN: 978-0-9904928-0-1